

A Rhetorical Model of Autism: a Pop Culture Personification of Masculinity in Crisis

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“It is autistic presence, in all its many forms, that is the core of all attempts to discuss agency and legitimacy in those subjects for whom autism is in some way part of their representational existence. It is also autistic presence that resists the many discourses that would simplify or ignore the condition. The material nature of such presence, the excess it creates when confronted with any idea of what ‘normal’ human activity or behaviour might be, stubbornly refuses to be reduced to any narrative – medical, social or cultural – that might seek to contain it without reference to its own terms.”

-- Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism*

“It takes a village to raise a child.
It takes a child with autism to raise the consciousness of the village.”

-- Elaine “Coach E!” Hall

“Nowhere am I so desperately needed as among a shipload of illogical humans.”

-- Spock, *I Mudd*

ABSTRACT

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By

Malcolm Matthews

In my dissertation, I argue that significant rhetorical mechanisms are at work in the production and consumption of portrayals of autism in literature, TV, and film. My project is driven by a central question: In what ways do portrayals of autism function as a visual rhetorical reconfiguration of masculinity that reimagines and repurposes disability in the service of the promotion of Humanist notions of white male hegemony in a technocentric era? I begin with Hans Asperger's 1944 claim that autism is "a variant of male intelligence." I connect that originary declaration with contemporary observations by Stuart Murray that autism is a form of "metaphorized hypermasculinity" and with Simon Baron-Cohen's controversial insistence that autism represents a version of "The Extreme Male Brain." Such testimonials, coupled with results from my own analysis and taxonomy of autistic characters throughout emerging popular culture manifestations, has led me to hypothesize that autism in portrayal serves as a survival guide for the white Western male in an era that threatens to be post-racial, post-ableist, post-phallocentric, and even post-anthropocentric. Fictional adolescent autists (e.g.: Christopher Boone, Nathaniel Clark, and Colin Fischer), living autists (e.g.: David Paravicini, Daniel Tammet, and Temple Grandin), autistic "techno-savants" (e.g.: Spock, Rain Man, Sheldon Cooper), and speculatively diagnosed historical figures (e.g.: Alan Turing, Andy Warhol, and Bobby Fischer), advance a distinct "autism aesthetic" and function as rhetorical texts whose readings expose an unexplored intersection of disability,

masculinity, ethnicity, and digital technology. Such characters illustrate in visual rhetorical terms how certain traits of autism are being romanticized in a digital era to equate ethnic whiteness with intellect and with a re-branded form of techno-masculinity. By providing a Rhetorical Model of autism as a link between autism as a clinical condition and as a cultural construct, I aim to form a more complete picture of autism and of its role in popular consciousness. As an interdisciplinary project, my dissertation draws upon the vocabularies and methodologies of gender, disability, and media studies. Under the unifying umbrella of visual rhetoric, I explore ethnicity, sexuality, and symbol-manipulation on the autism spectrum as they relate to Western man's hope for a unifying techno-human singularity and his anxiety over the possible obsolescence of conventional constructions of masculinity. At stake are notions of hegemonic masculinity and of autism as a rhetorical artifact with real world implications.

Keywords: autism; autism spectrum disorder; autism aesthetic; rhetorical model of autism; techno-savant; noble savant; masculinity; gender; sexuality; rhetoric; visual rhetoric; disability; ethnicity; whiteness; neurodiversity; film; television; YA literature; popular culture

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CHAPTER 1: Making the Case

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

In what ways do portrayals of autism function as a reconfiguration of masculinity that reimagines and appropriates disability to promote Humanist notions of white male hegemony in a technocentric era? What cultural needs are reflected and fulfilled by autism in representation? What is the function, in visual rhetorical terms, of an “autism aesthetic” as it appears in literature, TV, and film?

ARGUMENT

Autism is understood clinically as a spectrum condition. By definition, this allows clinicians to cast a wide net in their diagnoses. The spectrum nature of autism, with its often-subjective diagnostic parameters, also allows for the influx of a wide range of created characters, from Rain Man to Mr. Robot, who can be constructed to present as autistic. Whether diagnosed or not within their fictional universes, characters such as Sheldon Cooper (*Big Bang Theory*), Gary Bell (*Alphas*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*), and Christopher Boone (*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*), among many others, have become ubiquitous in popular culture as metonymic for autism spectrum disorder. Despite autism’s identification as a broad condition with nebulous boundaries, shifting diagnostic imperatives, unknown origins, and global epidemiology, certain specific restrictions remain in place. As expansive as the diagnostic net is, the portrayed characters captured under it are nearly universally white and male. So, is there a

reason that Sheldon Cooper is not black? Or overweight? Or blonde? Is there a reason that Rain Man is not a woman? In this interdisciplinary project, I address such questions and attempt to uncover the rhetorical mechanisms at work behind the scenes and to understand their cultural effects as they are employed in the creation, production, and consumption of autistic characters.

As a rhetorical construct, autistic characters in literature, TV, and film function as a text that can be read, analysed, interpreted, understood, and made useful in advancing scholarly approaches to autism, to rhetoric, and to interdisciplinarity itself. At their core, such texts function as an imperfect beginner's guide to understanding autism as a lived condition. As metaphorized versions of autism, these rhetorical texts are prone to the promotion of stereotypes, misunderstandings, and to a romanticised idea of the condition, and they have come to serve as a template for Humanist notions of white, male authority. The autistic in portrayal embodies an assembled text that serves a culturally-performative function. Once produced and distributed, autism can be received by consumers as an iterative construct that reinforces and furthers certain camouflaged cultural priorities.

Visual rhetorical constructions of portrayed autistics are informed by cultural needs and expectations, and they serve to reinforce hegemonic notions of whiteness and maleness. Although I focus on the visual elements of popular portrayals, I will not exclude autism-themed texts (including biographies, memoirs, and even certain clinical examinations) as these, too, with their physical descriptions of characters and settings, their use of graphics and images, and their choice and manipulation of fonts, chapter headings, layout, and style, represent a visual medium that is in keeping with the more traditionally visual images that I will reference and discuss from TV and film.¹ Within these media, I will make the case that, using the rhetorical tools at work in

¹ Such examples of visual constructions in autism-themed writing include the use of computer document pathways as titles for journal entries in the YA novel *Mindblind* (Roy), the use of prime numbers as chapters in *Curious*

the construction of autistic characters as present in literature, TV, and film, I can reverse-engineer the portrayed autistic to demonstrate the cultural needs and anxieties of the heteronormative male in the face of cultural, existential threats to Humanist conventions of masculinity.

My purpose in undertaking this project is to address a gap in traditional studies of autism. Autism has been examined from clinical, historical, medical, genetic, epigenetic, environmental, biological, psychological, etiological, epidemiological, and pedagogical perspectives, but there is little scholarship related to portrayals of autism or to gender and ethnicity on the spectrum, especially as these cultural constructs appear in media representation. While much attention has been paid to discrepancies between clinical diagnoses and such cultural constructions, not enough attention has been paid to the actual mechanisms that go into the manufacture of those constructions. Given that “a scientific idea of the ‘autistic male’ has filtered down into various kinds of fictional narratives” (Murray, *Representing Autism* 165), I envision this project as the development and exploration of a Rhetorical Model of autism that I have identified as existing in the liminal space between existing Medical and Social Models (Straus). While the Medical Model deals comprehensively with autism as a clinical condition and while the Social Model deals comprehensively with autism as a lived condition, this Rhetorical Model is necessary to understand autism as a represented condition. Together, these three models power and inform each other in a dynamic system that appears to function in a mutually-reinforcing choreography that fuels an iterative means of cultural inculcation.

Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (Haddon), visual representation of the author’s thoughts in *The Reason I Jump* (Higashida), diagrams, tables, and graphic descriptions of synesthesia and of other thought processes in *Born on a Blue Day* (Tammet), and charts, photos, and illustrations of brain scans in clinical-oriented texts such as *The Essential Difference* (Baron-Cohen), “Broken Mirrors: a Theory of Autism” (Ramachandran), “Mirrors in the Mind” (Rizzolatti), and many others.

Before I begin to describe my goals, hypotheses, and processes, however, I need to address two fundamental questions that combine both to motivate and to frame my analysis: Why autism? And why males?

For the first question, autism, in no small part because of its enigmatic nature and its apparently skyrocketing occurrence over the approximately 75 years since its first formal identification, invites speculation and curiosity and has become understandably established as a zeitgeist condition. The term “zeitgeist,” in fact, is ubiquitous in conversations about autism and appears in articles such as “Autistic Licence” (Bethune) and “Autism: the Most Popular Disability” (Drezner) as well as in foundational texts such as *Autism* (Murray), *Constructing Autism* (Nadesan), and *Neurotribes* (Silberman), among many others. But autism did not become a zeitgeist condition spontaneously; rather, multiple factors have contributed to autism as a type of disability du jour.² Out of a wide range of physical and neurological conditions, autism has been described as a cultural “barometer” (Rosenberg) and as a “projection screen for fears about modernity” (Silberman). In the digital era of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Internet has been called “Braille for autistics” (Blum, qtd. in Brosnan 254), a function that has allowed spectrum individuals to articulate their experiences, express their unique concerns, and assert their agency to mass audiences in ways that might not otherwise have been possible. Furthermore, advances in digital technology, especially with regard to bio and nanotechnologies and techno-human integration, feed into a pervasive narrative of the autistic figure as cold, hyper-logical, single-minded, unempathetic, asexual and in myriad ways as the personification of the advanced digital technologies of the computer era. Autism, especially in its often-erroneous or exaggerated conflation with savantism, fuels a contemporary narrative of “Geek Syndrome”

² A phrase often attributed to Susan Sontag and referencing other zeitgeist conditions such as polio, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS is that “every age has its illness.”

(Silberman) where programmers, Silicon Valley technophiles, computer engineers, and other members of so-called Nerd Culture, both real and imagined, can live out superhero fantasies where neurological disability and its attendant social eccentricities become reimagined as hyper-intellectual super-ability. Finally, autism is marketable. While perhaps any “ailment can drive a plot” (Morrice), autism specifically has yielded an explosion of narratives in what Stuart Murray refers to as “syndrome publishing” and “autism bandwaggoning” (*Representing Autism* 157) and where he cites as evidence, for example, a 2005 report of “900 new proposals in a ten-month period” (157) submitted to Jessica Kingsley Publishers following the release of Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. In these ways, autism functions in a way that few if any other disabilities are able.³

The next natural question is “Why males?” After all, some of the most cited living autistics include female bloggers such as Amanda Baggs, Amethyst Schaber, and Rachel Cohen-Rottenberg and female memoirists such as Donna Williams, Temple Grandin, Lucy Blackman, and Dawn Prince-Hughes. Some of the most vocal advocates for autistic children include female public figures such as Jenny McCarthy, Holly Robinson Peete, and an army of so-called “Mother Warriors” (Jack). And yet, throughout the fictive worlds of literature, TV, and film, the vast majority of prominently portrayed autists, including Raymond Babbitt (*Rain Man*), Sheldon

³ In terms of its cultural function, autism seems to provide more narrative opportunity than do other neurological conditions such as Fragile X, Rett Syndrome, Tourette’s, Capgras Syndrome, manic depression, PTSD, OCD, or Landau-Kleffner Syndrome to name just a few. It is hard to imagine media representations of such conditions that do not descend into the extremes of tragedy or slip into the common trope of romanticized tales of recovery and overcoming. This is in no way intended to minimize such conditions nor to argue that they warrant less attention, fewer treatment options, or more restricted allocation of financial resources compared to autism; instead, autism (even more so than schizophrenia, which is also a commonly represented condition in popular culture) appears to – by its enigmatic nature, by its relative “invisibility,” by its pervasiveness, by its clinical and cultural association with the masculine, and by its potential as a super-ability – stands out as a more easily metaphorized, sensationalised, commercialised, and commodifiable neurological condition. While I am aware of the risk of autism as “dominating the conversation,” it is my hope that a more robust understanding of autism as a rhetorically constructed cultural artifact will, in turn, work to destigmatize other neurological conditions and open the door for increased awareness, understanding, and diagnoses of conditions other than autism.

Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), Abed Nadir (*Community*) Shaun Murphy (*The Good Doctor*), Christopher Boone (*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*), and dozens of others, are significantly and nearly universally male. It is this exact discrepancy that informs my hypotheses and that drives my analysis. While an understanding of autism as a condition that affects living individuals irrespective of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, geography, or socio-economic status is undeniably essential in Medical and Social Models, my Rhetorical Model of autism gestures toward a hidden-in-plain sight imbrication of autism and masculinity.⁴ It is this exact conflation of conditions that Stuart Murray articulates in *Representing Autism* in a passage that warrants quotation in full:

But at the same time [as Simon Baron-Cohen's assertion of the "Extreme Male Brain Theory"], the explosion of interest in autism comes when there has been a sustained analysis of the concept of the masculine in all manner of social and cultural contexts. The idea that autism is some kind of *form* of the masculine has inevitably fed into such analysis, providing new opportunities for the metaphorization of the condition and a new context in which it might be depicted through the process of refraction and prosthesis. Within this logic, autism is a novel explanatory category, one that potentially provides new conclusions in the ongoing debates about male status and behaviour." (142, orig. italics)

As a "form of the masculine," autism, with dubious clinical accuracy, fits a stereotype of the systemising Western male as irretrievably technophilic, autonomous, unempathetic, tunnel-

⁴ Within the context of the Social Model, autism may present less frequently in girls due to certain ways that girls are socialized compared to boys. In the context of the Medical Model, autism is diagnosed approximately five times more in boys than in girls. In addition, there has been recent speculation about a "Female Protective Effect" that suggests a genetic imperative for females to require more "familial risk factors to reach an equivalent impairment threshold [to boys]" in order to receive an autism diagnosis (Robinson et. al.). For these reasons, among others that I will continue to articulate, autism's alignment with masculinity fits and reinforces a cultural narrative that I aim to interrogate and critique.

visioned, narcissistic, and tragically baffled by the intricacies of romance and by other nuanced dynamics of interpersonal and especially of heteronormative relationships. Even portrayed female autistic characters such as Linda Freeman (*Snow Cake*), Saga Norén (*The Bridge*), Lisbeth Salander (*Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), and Temperance “Bones” Brennan (*Bones*) wind up, to one degree or another, exhibiting these exact stereotyped “masculine” characteristics in a phenomenon that I will discuss in greater detail in later chapters. Autism is a “problem” or “disorder” only insofar as it is a condition that owes its represented (if not lived) existence to failures in neurotypical creative thinking and to a rigid cultural propagation of hegemonic masculinity as a baseline human ontology.

For these reasons, a close examination of the autism-masculine equation is indispensable in uncovering the rhetorical tools used to assemble and to shape each cultural construction. Combined, the pervasiveness of autism as a zeitgeist condition and its easy association, clinically and culturally, with males and masculinity serve to situate portrayed autism as a reinforcement of “hierarchies of legitimacy” (Connolly) and as a means to reinforce a white-male-intellect equation. My approach to this project depends upon an ability to discern and to examine the tools and strategies at work in the acquisition and assembly of autism as a socially and rhetorically constructed condition. My intention is not to exclude girls, women, females, or femininity from a pop culture analysis of autism; rather, I explore why these figures, also cultural constructions in their own right, are limited, manipulated as “masculine,” or are altogether excluded from much of pop culture representations of the condition to begin with.

GOALS

While ultimately complex and nuanced, essentially my goals in undertaking this particular project are four-fold: First, I have set out to discover if I could identify an autism-culture connection as a way, not to understand autism, but as a way to understand how autism is constructed in what Ian Hacking refers to as a “looping effect,” or the way that “the human sciences can make up people” (Hacking, *London Review of Books*). Second, I have sought to offer a new voice and perspective to the study of represented disability, autism, neurodiversity, and to the study of the assembly of particular cultural artifacts. Third, I hope to advance certain conversations within and around the study of autism, especially of portrayed autism as a created and as a *creating* condition. Finally, I want to offer, by way of a close-reading of autism texts, pragmatic tools that can be used constructively and helpfully by living autists, clinicians, family members, educators, and other stakeholders in and around the autism community.

Such an undertaking is vital as a means to round out medical and social understandings of autism based on how the condition has come to be packaged, presented, and perceived. A key component of my argument will be why sex, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, conspicuous by their absence, tend to be elided from portrayals and from conversations about the role of autism as a pop culture phenomenon. I venture into this endeavour with the understanding that there will be identifiable gaps between autism in reality and in representation but that there is value in discerning and coming to terms with these discrepancies. Although my hope is that my research will benefit those affected by autism, at its core, my project is intended to shed light on the Western, neurotypical community and on its prejudices, its hypocrisies, its assumptions, and on its long history of privileging the white, heteronormative, able-bodied male as a template for the human being. While the portrayed autistic figure, I will argue, has been created to entrench that

template, understanding the tools and techniques at play might also serve, in the long run, to disrupt it.

In terms of scholarship, my goal is to develop a unifying theory that draws together a diverse array of researchers into conversation to advance my argument concerning the rhetorical function of autism in portrayal. In doing so, I will make the case that specific rhetorical devices are employed in constructions of and uses for autistic characters. This is not an attempt to gain psychological insight into the minds and motives of pop culture producers; therefore, irrespective of agenda or intent, I will argue that such rhetorical constructions have real-world causes and effects. As a foundational element of this analysis, I will bring disability and masculinity into the autism conversation in a theory-based investigation with practical implications. While I will occasionally gesture toward scholarship within critical disability studies, my primary focus will be on rhetoric, visual representation, and on the perceived cultural function of portrayed autistic figures.

In portrayal, a given character under consideration in this project may exhibit certain traits of autism but not others. Although autism inspires questions possessed of real-world implications in clinical, familial, pedagogical, and political arenas, I will attempt to provide a rhetorical piece to the autism puzzle by answering a different line of questions; namely, what does the introduction of autism into popular consciousness do to popular understandings and representations of masculinity? In what ways do posthumanist and transhumanist movements, for example, inform an understanding of portrayals of the autistic character in media and popular culture? What does the presence of the portrayed autistic mean in terms of understanding 21st century definitions of masculinity? Is the represented autistic a challenger to or an enforcer of the primacy of man? For this final question, I will argue that the autistic appears initially as the

former but functions instead as the latter. As a marginalized, asexual, and technically disabled character, the portrayed autistic might appear to be an unlikely candidate for a reimagined 21st century model of masculinity. Yet this is the exact trajectory the portrayed autistic is taking.

As a starting point, my essential question can be distilled into a single initial answer; namely, that visual rhetorical representations of autism point to an attempted resolution to a contemporary crisis of ethnic whiteness under siege and to an accompanying perceived fear of 21st century male obsolescence. This crisis of ethnicity and masculinity is resolved by the elevation of the autistic mind, which, itself, leads to an eventual eradication of masculinity and, finally, to the ascension of a feminized, disembodied techno-consciousness. In arriving at this conclusion, my goal is not to indict the white male categorically nor to impugn any motives that may or may not exist in the construction, distribution, and consumption of autistic characters; rather, I incorporate a visual Rhetorical Model to illustrate the mechanics behind and the effects of rhetorical constructions of autism as a translatable cultural artifact.

In this interdisciplinary project, I draw from multiple texts. Fiction, TV, film, memoir, blogs, and biographies are among the texts that I will “read” in visual rhetorical terms. I am most interested in what autism “looks like” and what such visual rhetorical representations say about how autism is constructed, received, and co-opted by both producers and consumers to perform specific functions in the world. While autism tends to be thought of and discussed in terms of neurology and behaviour, my approach privileges autism as an embodied condition where autistic physiognomy is as important in textual representation as the autistic personality.

Identifying autism texts presents certain challenges. Autism manifests in the modern mainstream in myriad, sometimes contradictory ways. Among these are autism as a lived condition; as a medical object of inquiry; as an evolving historical reality; as literal, written texts;

and as visual rhetorical texts in the form of TV and film.⁵ Within these texts, autism presents from openly diagnosed to strongly implied to purely speculative. Some texts, such as the Young Adult novels *Mindblind* (Roy) and *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon), communicate perceptions of the autistic mind using equations, computer codes, and alternate fonts. Other texts engage in lengthy physical descriptions, often in the first person, to illustrate the autistic perspective. The texts that comprise autism in TV and film also often rely on mathematical figures, diagrams, and equations presented from a first-person point of view ostensibly to provide insight into the enigmatic autistic mind. Autists, both created and as re-imagined historical figures, tend to adhere to a certain common physiognomy and present with common idiosyncratic behavioural patterns. In all cases, it is the visual attempt to identify and to make sense of the autistic mind that drives my analysis and that informs my argument.

Both autism itself and the texts in which the condition appears constitute a rhetorical spectrum. In medical terms, autism is a clinical “text” in flux. As a historical text, autism continues to be studied in terms of its dubious origins⁶, its place in the early 20th century eugenics movements in Germany and the U.S., conspiracy theories about etiology, various treatment programs, political battles over epidemiology and funding of treatment plans, and concern over the ability of adult autists to live fully within neurotypical society. Literal, written

⁵ For purposes of this dissertation, I limit my argument to appearances of autism in literature, TV, and film. Other texts such as movie posters, book covers, broadcast news stories, print ads, promotional material, public service announcements, informational fliers, graphic designs, creative and performance arts, etc., while compelling and constitutive of texts available for rhetorical analysis, fall just outside the scope of my current interest in autism as a cultural artifact. In future studies, I intend to broaden that scope to consider such appearances of portrayed autism, as these, too, have much to offer in arriving at a more complete understanding of autism and of transitioning codes of masculinity.

⁶ The term “autism” is most often attributed to Swiss psychologist Eugen Bleuler who used the term in 1911 as part of his description of schizophrenia. Autism itself was identified with that term nearly simultaneously by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger who were working in the U.S. and in Austria, respectively, but who apparently never met, communicated, compared notes, or otherwise reconciled their findings with each other.

texts in the form of biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and blogs constitute yet another representation of the condition. Finally, TV and film offer the most striking visual textual representations of autism. Each of these families of texts is different and yet rhetorically meaningful in its own way. I have based my argument primarily on the visual representations of autism, although no analysis of any single element or manifestation of autism is complete without an awareness of the other elements that constitute and represent the condition.

My project is intended as a scholarly argument but also as a potential guide for those in the neurotypical and autism communities who wish to round out clinical understandings of autism as a condition closely connected to issues of gendered identity. Autism has been studied extensively as a clinical condition but rarely as a condition reconstituted and repurposed by producers of popular culture. Even less frequent are conversations about ethnicity, sex, and gender on the autism spectrum or about misconceptions of living autists as extraordinarily sub or superhuman. To contribute to existing scholarship, I address these omissions from a Humanities perspective and argue that manufactured depictions of autism function as the embodied rhetorical response to perceived threats to traditional notions of masculinity. Structured with an eye toward improved understanding and treatment of autism in the future, my project delivers an interdisciplinary, Humanities-based analysis intended to contribute to the fields of rhetoric, medical humanities, gender studies, critical disability studies, and media studies. I further intend to provide clinicians with new ways of thinking about and engaging in enhanced treatment opportunities including enriched therapeutic interventions, models for role play, improved programs for social skills instruction, methods for identification and dismantling of stereotypes, and a pragmatic mechanism for addressing the taboo subject of sexuality on the autism spectrum.

By tracking popular expressions of autism, I aim to draw attention to the condition as a cultural phenomenon and to allow for a range of knowledge transfer across disciplines.

Extending beyond the study of autism, my project is intended as well to add to the field of rhetoric. Jay Dolmage argues in his doctoral project, *Metis: Disability, Rhetoric and Available Means*, that “[t]he rhetorical negotiation of disability is intrinsic to all attempts to understand phenomenologically: we construct able and disabled bodies, and thus able and disabled ideas of being and becoming” (137). Building upon Dolmage’s assertion, I turn attention from disability in general to autism in particular. If “knowing arises out of disability as does meaning” (137) as Dolmage suggests, then existential being, at least for the 21st century male, might equally arise from the rhetorical constructions of autism that are packaged and disseminated into the world of popular culture. A rhetorical understanding of and approach to autism allows for the possibility that autism is constructed by but also works to construct contemporary models of masculinity where the portrayed autistic represents simultaneously an idealized and feared version of what men might be or else what they might need to become in an era that is increasingly technocentric and post-phallogentric.

In keeping with a Foucauldian paradigm of similitude, representation, and history-based epistemes, I interrogate contemporary visual rhetorical constructions of autism as disruptions in the discursive practices that align organizing principles of knowledge with truth. I bring rhetoric into the interdisciplinary fold by way of Derrida’s advocacy of “writing across the disciplines” as a means to combat the “hegemony of some kind of norm in writing” (Olson 2). I expand upon Barthes’ “Rhetoric of the Image” and his insistence on the commercial elements of visual rhetoric by arguing, essentially, that *all* Western visual rhetorical images, the autistic included, serve to create and to reinforce cultural meaning. In this regard, my dissertation might be

summarised as a project that examines what, why, how, and with what effect the particular condition of autism functions as a cultural advertisement.

The portrayed autistic provides the rhetorical means to connect cultural meaning with clinical objectivity by way of Donna Haraway's positioning of science itself as rhetorical and as "a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power" ("Situated Knowledges" 346). While such scholars and their respective approaches lay the groundwork for my own approach, I attempt to expand upon existing scholarship in my examination of autism as a rhetorical construct.

Structurally, my dissertation is primarily a hermeneutic reading of literary texts, TV, and film supplemented with autobiographical and memoir accounts of autistics and based on consultations with experts in the field. In the next chapters, I will undertake the formation of a taxonomy of identified living and fictional characters in literature, TV, and film. In addition, I will identify generic trends as a means to argue for portrayed autism as a rhetorically-constructed version of a postmodern masculine prototype. Part of my argument involves exploring the exceptions such as Elliot Alderson (*Mr. Robot*) where the autistic figure engages in heteronormative sex and Lisbeth Salander (*Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) where the autistic figure is a bi-sexual woman. In Chapter 2, I elaborate upon such exceptions and their place in the Rhetorical Model of autism.

To qualify as data in my examination, the images I selected had to be symbolic, mediated, and "presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience" (Foss "Theory" 144). In my case, I distinguish between purpose and function. While speculating about the former may be tempting, it is beyond the scope of my analysis to guess at or to investigate intent; rather, my project is limited to the specifics of created images with my

argument based on how such images, constructed as they are, might affect and inform audiences. Within the world of portrayed autism, whether a given writer, producer, actor, or director intended a certain message or anticipated a certain response does not have bearing on my argument. The existence of the created character and the ways such characters are portrayed are the concerns of a visual rhetorical analysis. I am, therefore, making an argument based on the work that an existing object, the portrayed autistic, appears to be doing in the world.

Although I am focused on assembling observable facts to highlight the autistic as a rhetorical object and on providing evidence to build a case, my dissertation takes certain ethical consideration into account. The puzzle of autism raises understandable questions: What is autism? Where did it come from? Is it an environmentally caused condition? A neurological glitch? An evolutionary imperative? A genetic perfect storm? Can it be cured? Should it be? Such questions, while important and compelling, are peripheral to my argument. While I hope that my research might help others to address and to answer such questions, my more immediate concern is the effect of autism as a cultural construct and the rhetorical means by which it serves a performative function.

Imbued within every aspect of my argument is a respect for differences between autism in life and in portrayal. My project is neither intended to prove nor to disprove autism in fictional or historical figures or in the texts in which they operate. I do not claim the ability to diagnose autism; instead, I construct my argument around my identification of patterns in portrayal and my analysis of visual rhetorical mechanisms that, irrespective of motive or intent, operate in real and discernible ways as cultural artifacts. In an undertaking such as mine, there is a danger, no matter how unintended, that the severity of autism and of its real effects on the individuals, families, clinicians, and educators who comprise the autism community, might be minimized or

that misperceptions might be inadvertently reinforced.⁷ My dissertation is constructed to perform the opposite function. By revealing the rhetorical architecture behind ornamental, pseudo-scientific constructions of autism, the reality of the lived condition might be exposed and better understood.

No matter the approach or from what disciplinary home they are conducted, studies of autism represent a minefield of potential ethical, philosophical, and practical problems. The methodologies of many clinical autism studies have been called into question. In the *DSM-IV*, for example, the simple use of “or” instead of “and” in the litany of diagnostic imperatives led to a serious indictment of statistical validity as well as to confusion over autism’s epidemiology (Silberman). In addition, there is a tendency for producers to cherry-pick certain elements of autism and to exclude others. What is less open to debate is the fact of the prevalence of autism in public consciousness. The condition has been adopted by mainstream purveyors and consumers of popular culture as a convenient metaphor for what man is both capable of becoming and what he might risk turning into. It is the rhetorical construction and function of that metaphor that most interests me and that represents the home base of scholarship to which my argument will return.

Although I primarily consider created autistic characters, some living autists such as Temple Grandin, Amanda Baggs, Tito Mukhopadhyay, Daniel Tammet, Donna Williams, and John Elder Robison enter my analysis at different times and in a variety of contexts. In these cases and for ethical reasons, I will continue to make clear the distinction between living and portrayed autistic individuals.

⁷ As much as possible during my analysis, I have endeavoured to distinguish between living and represented autists. To that end, I often incorporate markers such as “represented,” “portrayed,” “manufactured,” and “constructed” to indicate a shift from autism as a lived condition to autism as a rhetorical construct.

TERMINOLOGY

In discussing autism, it helps to have a common language and a common frame of reference, something that those in the psychological fields have been struggling to attain since Hans Asperger's and Leo Kanner's first identification of the condition in and around 1943. Throughout my thesis, I will be using a variety of terms, some ambiguous or culturally-loaded, that I will define here to avoid confusion later on. These represent the terms I will use most frequently:

Asperger's Syndrome: This condition, often abbreviated as AS, has sometimes been called "high-functioning autism." The term has been applied to children and, over time, to adults who manifest what Hans Asperger identified in 1944 as "autistic psychopathy." Individuals with this condition tend to exhibit common traits of average to above average intelligence accompanied by an obsessive interest, limited physical dexterity⁸, and an inability to form lasting, normative friendships. Today, such individuals, whether officially diagnosed or not, often self-identify as "Aspies." In purely cultural, non-clinical terms, "Asperger's" is often described as extreme social awkwardness accompanied by above-average intelligence, an inclination toward science or engineering fields, and a tendency to hyper-focus on a single object or task. As of 2013, Asperger's Syndrome, while still appearing in public discourse, no longer appears within a formal diagnosis in the *DSM-V* and has instead been relocated under the autism umbrella.

⁸ "clumsiness" is noted as a diagnostic feature for autism as described in the *ICD* but not in the *DSM-V*.

Autism Spectrum Disorder: Because autism presents in myriad ways and degrees, the condition is often referred to as “Autism Spectrum Disorder” or ASD. People living with autism range from those with average to above average intelligence and relatively high social functionality to those requiring constant, even lifetime personal care. Because deficiencies in communication, imaginative play, and social interaction are present to one degree or another in all cases, many different types of individuals and their attendant characteristics fall under the autism umbrella. This range in presentation may open clinical autism to cultural distortion, while in the case of media as culturally productive, the spectrum aspect of autism offers a buffet of easily-identifiable character traits upon which a pop culture producer might draw.

Autism: At its most basic, autism is a neurological condition characterised by a “triad of impairments.” Under the so-called “deficit model,” these involve an observable deficiency in communication, imagination, and empathetic response. To qualify as an official diagnosis, clinical experts mandate that these deficiencies must prove to have a negative impact on an individual’s ability to function in a normative cultural, social, academic, and/or familial environment. Although there are material distinctions between them, I will occasionally use the terms “autistic,” “autist,” “person with autism,” “autistic-savant,” “techno-savant,” and “Aspie” interchangeably. Such interchangeability, while frowned upon in a strict clinical context, reflects the cultural reality of popular perceptions, misperceptions, and conflation of certain characteristics within the autism spectrum. Additionally, living autists accept certain of these terms and reject others in their own self-identification. Without cultural consensus, each of the variable terms points nevertheless to what I perceive to be a modern pop culture phenomenon of characters who present certain common traits. These shared traits include but are not necessarily

restricted to average to above average intelligence, limited empathy, emotional disconnectedness, hypo or hypersensitivity to external stimuli, delayed or compromised language skills and acquisition, echolalia (imitative or repetitive speech patterns), overly formalised or “robotic” speech, perceived asexuality, physical androgyny, obsessive interest in a particular subject, compulsive behaviors, stimming (see below), exceptional memory, deficient social skills, and naiveté about cultural mores accompanied by apparently superhuman abilities in a math, science, computer, or a technological field. My argument centers around which of these characteristics are cherry-picked in representation, which are excluded, and why this matters in a larger cultural context.

Bromance: The term “bromance” is a pop culture portmanteau of “brother” and “romance.” Editor Dave Carnie is credited with coining the term in the skateboard magazine *Big Brother* in the 1990s to refer to the homoerotic, although not homosexual, relationships between fellow skateboarders.⁹ Although the term is relatively modern, the idea itself is archetypal. In modern usage, the bromance has become a relied upon trope in literature, TV, and film and in many other forms of popular culture. Commonly cited examples include Felix and Oscar from *The Odd Couple*, Roger Murtaugh and Martin Riggs from the *Lethal Weapon* series, Seth and Evan from *Superbad*, and Turk and J.D. from *Scrubs*. The dynamic is perhaps most prevalent in buddy cop movies and in television romantic comedies where a lone wolf white male protagonist is called upon less often to save the day single-handedly and more often to share the burden with an “othered” partner, usually a person of color and now, with seemingly more frequency, a technically brilliant but socially inept male companion. This partner, as I will demonstrate in

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bromance#cite_note-grandbromance-2

Chapter 4, is typically more logical and scientific than the leading man and relies on his more socially adept neurotypical partner for help navigating a baffling maze of neurotypical social interactions.

Culture: I will use this term to refer primarily to localised, non-universal commonalities in shared world-view, values, assumptions, family structure, government, interpersonal relationships, sexual mores, and socio-political institutions found, for purposes of my argument, in the geographic regions known colloquially as the “West” or the “Global North.” Such geopolitical communities tend toward relatively low religiosity, a greater degree of secularism, a predominately Caucasian ethnic makeup, and liberal democratic political systems. These communities include but are not limited to Canada, The United States, the United Kingdom and much of Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Social psychologist Geert Hofstede offers a succinct definition of culture as “...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (5). Because my argument is a rhetorical analysis of the performative nature of autism as a produced and consumed artifact that functions to distinguish between autistics and neurotypicals through cultural iteration, Hofstede’s definition is especially appropriate. While a growing body of work deals with autism as clinically present in the so-called “East”¹⁰, my project is primarily limited, for reasons stated above, to visual images and rhetorical constructions of autism in the cultural West.

¹⁰ see work by scholars such as Roy Richard Grinker and Eujung Kim, for example

DSM: An abbreviation for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, this is the go-to reference for understanding the diagnostic imperatives used by clinicians and other agencies and individuals associated with the health care profession. The manual is revised periodically, most recently for the fifth time (*DSM-V*) in 2013. It is in this iteration that Asperger's and other spectrum conditions such as PDD-NOS came to be codified under the umbrella term of "autism." Currently in its 10th edition, the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD) that is produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) is another often-referenced manual for clinicians in the identification of various conditions.

Extrageric: Used in complement with "intergeneric" (see below), I will elaborate upon this term in Chapter 2. In my most basic use, the term refers to the malleability and multi-featured nature and functionality of the represented autistic figure that facilitates his presence across a variety of genres.

Geek Chic: Like "Nerd Culture" (see below), this term began as an ironic description of a retro-aesthetic but has worked its way into the modern mainstream over time. The term calls to mind the Huey Lewis and the News pop hit "Hip to Be Square" that became an anthem for members of Nerd Culture in the 1980s. For my purposes, I will use the term to denote an appropriated aesthetic that represents a 21st century reconfigured version of hegemonic masculinity that adopts and assimilates characteristics that it historically rejected, scorned, or otherwise marginalised.

Intergeneric: Used in complement with “extrageneric” (see above), I will elaborate upon this term in Chapter 2. In my most basic use, the term refers to the migratory presence of autistic characters across a variety of genres.

Man: I will use the term “man” not in the generic and cultural-linguistically phallogentric sense of “human being” but with specific reference to the fact that I will be discussing the contemporary concept of masculinity, that the fictional characters who will serve as my examples are primarily male, and that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism spectrum disorder tends to affect males in disproportionate numbers with boys nearly five times more likely (1 in 54) than girls (1 in 252) to have autism.¹¹ There are four main reasons, I will argue, that the autistic is nearly invariably portrayed as male: First, autism is clinically diagnosed five times more in boys than in girls, making gender a natural point of focus in the creation of autistic characters. Second, my argument is that the autistic character is a stand-in specifically for male insecurities and desires in a transitioning era of increased technocentrism and cultural heterogeneity. Third, a female autistic techno-savant even further threatens the Humanist male and reinforces male anxieties of a speculated posthuman ebbing of phallogentric hegemony. Fourth, although clinical confluences of autism and masculinity have been controversial with studies frequently challenged based largely on their perceived personal biases, political agendas, and suspect methodologies, the male as systemiser and the female as empathiser play into a culturally inculcated narrative that not coincidentally tends to favour men in social, familial, educational, recreational, occupational, and political arenas.

¹¹ “Data & Statistics.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 26 Dec. 2013. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.

Nerd Culture: This term, once perceived culturally as stereotypically derisive, has come to encapsulate a generalised population of individuals, both male and female, who largely and often with great pride self-identify as hyper-intellectual, unathletic, and obsessively dedicated to science fiction, fantasy, cos-play, board and video games, and experimental or avant-garde tropes within popular culture. I will frequently use this term to reference an imagined community of individuals, whether neurotypical or on the autism spectrum, who conform to a stereotyped model of subordinated masculinity.

Neurotypical: I will use the term “neurotypical” (NT) to refer to socially-adept individuals who do not meet the criteria for an autism diagnosis nor for any other medically-recognized neurological condition and who fall within culturally-established boundaries for intellectual, physical, emotional, psychological, and neurological normativity. As a means of identification and of differentiation, the term “neurotypical” has become common in discourse about autism and appears frequently in juxtaposition with the term “autism.” Although the term has become pervasive, “neurotypicals,” like “Nerd Culture,” represent an imagined community for purposes of my argument.

Noble Savant: This is my original term for the postmodern incarnation of the so-called noble savage. The characteristics of the noble savage have been transposed from a “dark other” to a new, significantly white techno-other. This techno-other, in the form of the autistic techno-savant, remains marginalized and romanticized, an aporia I will unpack in Chapter 3 as a condition of my overall argument.

PDD-NOS: This is a clinical condition that stands for “Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified.” The label has been used to identify individuals with many but not all of autism’s recognized diagnostic imperatives. Like Asperger’s Syndrome, this term was excluded in favour of the umbrella term “autism” in the *DSM-V* (2013).

Posthumanism: Although the definition of posthumanism continues to be ranging, debated, and re-imagined, I will use the term occasionally in my argument to refer to a hypothesised, de-centered human ontology that replaces phallo- and anthropocentrism with a more unifying understanding of non-hierarchical configurations of life, individuality, physical and neuro-normativity, biodiversity, species egalitarianism, global awareness and responsibility, and bio-interactions and encounters. Definitions relevant to my analysis of the autistic figure include posthumanism as “a need to think differently about ourselves” (Braidotti 12), the posthuman body as “data made flesh” (Gibson, qtd. in Hayles 5), and the human who “becomes posthuman by coming (returning?) home to the technological matrix” (292), where, for my purposes that techno-matrix is metaphorized in popular portrayal as the autistic mind. Although posthumanism addresses the relationship between bio organisms and technological constructs, as the terms relate to my argument, I will differentiate between posthumanism and transhumanism with the latter focused primarily on cyborgs, mechanical prosthetics, and the anticipated techno-human singularity where human consciousness becomes indiscernible from digital neuro-networks. For purposes of my project, I view posthumanism as the greater existential threat to conventions of Humanist masculinity. Although mine is not a “posthumanist” project per se, the represented autistic figure aligns with but also occasionally rejects certain foundational elements of

posthumanist discourse. As a result, I will draw upon posthumanist scholarship as needed for the purposes of elucidating certain parts of my argument.

Savantism: According to savant expert Darold Treffert, savant syndrome is characterised by an “island of genius” amid other handicapping conditions and neurological conditions, including but not limited to autism spectrum disorder. Treffert concludes that “as many as one in 10 persons with autistic disorder have such remarkable abilities in varying degrees” and that “whatever the particular savant skills, it is always linked to massive memory” (“Savant Syndrome” 351).

Treffert notes that 50% of savants have autism; the other 50% often have psychological disorders or mental illnesses (Ibid., 353). Part of my analysis will be dedicated to exploring that “island of genius” when it is inhabited not just by the isolated autistic savant but by the autistic techno-savant accompanied by a neurotypical bromantic partner.¹²

Stimming: This is a term used both clinically and within popular culture to refer to the self-stimulating movements, gestures, and behaviours often exhibited by spectrum individuals.

Stimming may manifest as tapping or rocking or as gesticulations or tics. The severity of such

¹² I am approaching this thesis with the understanding that pop culture representations of autism do not necessarily reflect the full range of diagnostic imperatives found in a clinical analysis. (For example, Temple Grandin is often cited as a talented individual with autism but is not recognized as having savant syndrome.) Instead, for this analysis, observed traits such as those listed above will determine the level to which a given character may be considered to have a spectrum disorder. Characters such as Spock, Abed Nadir, Sheldon Cooper, and Sherlock Holmes may not have been intended as autistic nor may they have ever been identified formally as such in their respective fictional universes; nevertheless, they represent in dramatized portrayal what I interpret to be a postmodern fascination with the autistic techno-savant’s computer-like superhuman abilities. Although there are numerous examples of autistics in popular culture, again, it is the combination of the techno-savantism and the entering into a bromantic partnership that has led me to select the specific examples I will use as the centerpiece of my analysis, particularly in Chapter 4.

actions ranges from gentle and calming to potentially self-injurious behaviours. Many autistics cite stimming as their means to deal with sensory overload from the external environment.

Techno-savant: This is my original term for a specialized type of non-mechanically mediated superheroic incarnation of the autistic savant memorably personified by Dustin Hoffman's 1988 portrayal of Raymond "Rain Man" Babbitt. I differentiate autistic techno-savantism from conventionally-defined savantism, which is the more common understanding of supernatural genius. The autistic techno-savant is a created character, imagined as the embodiment of what men stand to gain and lose as hegemonic access to power shifts increasingly since WWII and into a technocentric era.¹³ The autistic techno-savant is characterised primarily by a prodigious memory, poor social skills, alienated status within his cultural milieu, and extreme techno-centrism. For purposes of my argument, this character is always an un-augmented human (or humanoid in the case of Spock) and is one I differentiate from cyborgs and other artificially-enhanced techno-human hybrids. Because I make a distinction along these lines between transhumanism (a movement dealing primarily with artificial prosthesis, mechanical enhancement, and techno-human integration) and posthumanism (a movement challenging Humanist notions of the "human" as the self-identified apex of life in a contrived hierarchy that privileges white males above all others) and because I am interested in autism as a biological, neurological, and non-prosthetic condition, characters such as Data (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*), Seven-of-Nine (*Star Trek: Voyager*), Replicants (*Blade Runner*), Sonny (*iRobot*),

¹³ I locate WWII as a transition point between modernism and postmodernism. The years of and around 1940-1945 when autism was first officially diagnosed, represent the era of Alan Turing, his eponymous Turing Test, digital computers, a transition from physical to atomic and virtual technologies, Adolf Hitler's application of European ethnocentrism and colonial violence against other Europeans (see Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*), a technological quantum leap in terms of human capabilities for innovation and mass destruction, and an existential shift from the physicality of the doing-body to the virtual body within a world of digital information technology.

Murphy (*RoboCop*), and other similar characters in this category, do not qualify. Furthermore, the artificially enhanced human does not represent the same existential threat to Humanist notions of masculinity and may, in fact, help to reinforce them. The non-prosthetic autistic techno-savant, on the other hand, much more powerfully calls into question ideas of what it means to be a man in the 21st century age of gender fluidity and of intellect rather than purely body-based representations of masculinity.

In constructing my argument in these terms, I will address conversations between certain “imagined communities.” While it is impossible definitively to identify or to draw a clear border around demographics represented by autistics, neurotypicals, producers, consumers, etc., I *can* identify certain pop culture communities with distinct characteristics and generalised patterns, expectations, responses, values, behaviours, and social tendencies. My invocation of these imagined communities is not intended as a cultural anthropological representation; instead, I identify these as communities that exist and interact within the worlds of pop culture production and where each has a relationship with autism as a lived and portrayed condition. For example, while terms such as “autistic” and “neurotypical” might be interpreted differently by a clinician or challenged by an anthropologist, for my purposes, such terms reference the very “neighbourhoods” that comprise the pop culture community.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

To advance my argument, I have assembled my thesis around a specific organizing principle. I address each issue in a deliberate order and structure my argument to facilitate reader access to certain otherwise undiscussed and uninterrogated elements of represented autism. As

an enigmatic and often controversy-inciting condition, autism warrants extraordinary care in any discussion of its manifestation as a pop culture phenomenon.

In Chapter 2, I acquaint the reader with autism and its place and rhetorical function in popular culture. To contextualise my argument, I formulate and explicate autism as an intergeneric construct and what I have identified as its four *extrageneric* templates.¹⁴ Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for my analysis by providing a context, a common frame of reference, and the vocabulary, drawn from genre and media studies, that I will use to further my argument. Based on the notion that genres “serve as an index to the social reality in which such forms figure” (Foss “Theory” 112), I first propose a templated autistic character as distinct from other represented characters in the disability genre. To better understand both autism and the work that the autistic character performs within popular culture, I identify in this chapter certain common characteristics of autistics in portrayal, I establish parameters to frame the discussion, and I create a taxonomy of represented autistic characters. In establishing the autistic figure as a unique intergeneric phenomenon, I ask and will attempt to answer why it is that such manufactured characters, within and between genres, are nearly always white, asexual men or boys with common physiognomies, personality traits, relationships, roles, story arcs, gendered characteristics, and narrative functions. Identifying intergeneric function and extrageneric

¹⁴ As I will elaborate in Chapter 2, I see the autistic, in this case, as performing two distinct yet interrelated generic functions: First, the autistic character is “intergeneric” in that he transcends generic categorization and appears in science fiction, romance, comedy, mystery, and drama throughout literature (especially YA literature), TV, and film. Second, the autistic character is “extrageneric” in the sense that he functions as a blank template whose unique autistic characteristics are susceptible to being cherry-picked to mould a figure that can then be slotted into a given genre as needed for the thematic purposes of that genre. By way of illustration, the autistic’s stereotyped proclivity for hyper-logical thinking and technocentric intellect is highlighted in science fiction (e.g.: *Alphas*, *Midnight Special*, *Martian Time-Slip*); his stereotyped combination of hypermasculinity and sexual naiveté makes him well-suited as a subject of romantic story-arcs (e.g.: *Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Atypical*); his stereotyped inability to understand neurotypical social conventions is mined for laughs in comedies (e.g.: *Big Bang Theory*, *Community*, *Young Sheldon*); his tendency for analytical, forensic thinking makes him a fitting character to populate the mystery, crime, and detective genres (e.g.: *Sherlock*, *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, *The Accountant*) and medical dramas (e.g.: *House*, *Bones*, *The Good Doctor*).

properties of autism in portrayal enables a more complete understanding of the condition, of how it is shaped according to generic need, of how the condition is perceived, and of what consequences such perceptions of represented or misrepresented constructions of autism might have on consumers of popular culture.

In Chapter 3, I explore the rhetorical means by which the autistic figure has come to function as a 21st century subaltern, or cultural Other. In this chapter, I expose ways that the autistic, as a 21st century Other, has become an embodied means for the majoritarian Western male to combat the encroachment of feminist, posthumanist, biodiversity, minority rights, civil rights, and other egalitarian-based socio-cultural movements that threaten to displace the white male as the centre of the Humanist cultural universe. If contemporary ontologies such as posthumanism, for example, are fundamentally post-racial, post-phallogentric, and even post-gender and post-anthropocentric, then there is no longer a cultural need for a marginalised Other. What such movements overlook, however, is that eliminating the Other in theory does not necessarily eliminate the *need* for the identification of the Other in practice. I see this identification of the autistic in portrayal as drawing (or re-drawing) hierarchies along lines of masculinity, ethnicity, and techno-centric intellect. Identification is the first step in the act of affiliation and understanding, but it is also the first step in this act of othering. In the history of Western culture, the Other has assumed myriad forms, but the Othered character, itself, remains ubiquitous. The autistic Other reveals an oversight in the thinking within posthumanist, feminist, and other universal civil rights movements and serves as a vessel designed to preserve whiteness and maleness in advance of ontologies that challenge long-held tenets of Humanism.

In Chapter 4, I fashion a detailed examination of the rhetorical means by which the autistic character completes a homoerotic partnership in the form of a cinematic neurotypical-

autistic bromance. Specifically, I critique the role of the autistic “techno-savant,” a romanticized figure with impaired social skills and limited empathy accompanied by superhuman abilities in science, memory, or mathematics. In this chapter, I reveal the rhetorical mechanisms that are employed in the frequent homoerotic pairing of autistic techno-savants and neurotypical alpha males. After having established, in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, the parameters of an intergeneric autistic figure and the role of the autistic Other, I undertake this analysis of the undiscussed, hidden-in-plain-sight phenomenon of the homoerotic, bromantic partnership exhibited in neurotypical-autistic pairings such as Kirk and Spock (*Star Trek*), Troy and Abed (*Community*), Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), and John Watson and Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*). Although there are dozens of such pairings scattered throughout popular culture, I have selected these four as the best exemplars for my assertion that the autistic techno-savant serves the rhetorical function of enabling expressions of love between men in an era where conventions of masculinity and gender identity are being re-imagined, re-defined, and re-purposed as flexible rather than as fixed cultural constructs.

In Chapter 5, I build upon the idea of romance and love on the autism spectrum to make two arguments: first, that the reconfigured masculinity heralded by the autistic in portrayal threatens to dilute the portrayed autistic into irrelevance, and second, that this reconfiguration ends with the male figure giving way to a feminised, disembodied techno-consciousness. This latter phenomenon represents the end of a trajectory of the portrayed autistic from misunderstood to feared to apotheosized to assimilated and, finally, to obsolete. At this stage, I will illustrate how and why the portrayed autistic transitions from rhetorically productive to sexually reproductive. The autistic has gone from marginalised to utilised to normalised to sexualised. Chronologically, the parallel progression in portrayal moves from Spock to Rain Man to Sheldon Cooper to Elliot

Alderson and, finally, to feminised techno-human hybrids as seen in films such as *Lucy*, *Her*, and *Operator*. At this point in the 21st century, the autism of the autistic figure has begun to disappear. I conclude with the assertion that autism is the most recent and arguably the most compelling rung on the ladder of male anxiety. This anxiety, I will argue, emanates from man's role in a digital and increasingly "autistic" world.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

My thesis analyzes from a humanities perspective what has previously been studied primarily in a psychological, pedagogical, and neurological context. Drawing from literature, philosophy, history, and media and disability studies, I attempt to form a more complete picture of autism and of its non-clinical role in popular culture and in media portrayal. For purposes of addressing autism as reflective of a contemporary crossroads of masculinity in crisis, interdisciplinarity has advantages not found in disciplinary approaches. To ground my project in interdisciplinarity, I differentiate my approach from disciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multidisciplinary studies. Because rhetoric is already interdisciplinary, it serves as a natural lens through which to view autism as a performative text. Because rhetoric and interdisciplinarity deal in their own ways with struggle and tension, they make sense as a way to approach autism, a neurological condition that also deals with and is often characterised by struggle and tension.

As an interdisciplinary project, my argument references and expands upon scholarship in multiple disciplines. In the fields of philosophy and phenomenology, I call upon works by Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Emmanuel Levinas. In the intersection of autism and popular culture, I draw upon works by scholars Jordynnn Jack, Stuart Murray, Sonya Loftis,

Steve Silberman, Leslie Fiedler, and Ian Hacking. Drawing upon experts in the fields of gender and masculinity studies, I examine and interrogate the works of Judith Butler, Michael DeAngelis, and R. W. Connell. Within the fields of clinical autism studies, I reference Simon Baron-Cohen, Maureen Connelly, Oliver Sacks, Uta Frith, Lorna Wing, Edith Stein, and Darold Treffert. For the elements of my argument that rely on posthumanist scholarship (primarily in Chapters 3 and 5), I build upon the works of Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway. In genre and media studies, I draw from and elaborate upon theories put forth by scholars such as Vivian Sobchack, Rick Carpenter, John Alberti, and Celestino Deleyto.

The disciplinary home base to which I will return and under which the other existing scholarship will fall is the field of visual rhetoric. Within this field and building upon the work of visual rhetorical scholars such as Sonja Foss and Jay Dolmage, I will argue that portrayed autism functions beyond an "...object rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communication" (Foss "Framing" 304) and instead serves as a roadmap for the identification of a performative cultural ideology. Rather than rhetoric as a communication tool, as an expression of meaning, or as a means for persuasion, I will examine rhetoric as a set of tools used to construct autism as a conveyance for the cultural elevation of white, technocentric masculinity.

While the collection of scholars relevant to my project is diverse, no single theorist nor discipline has yet put forth a compelling case for the rhetorical work being done by represented autism in popular culture. As such, I have aimed to create new analytical tools, inspired by and designed to complement existing ones. As Dawn Youngblood points out, an interdisciplinary study occurs "when researchers go beyond establishing a common meeting place to developing new methods and theory crafted to transcend the disciplines in order to solve problems" (2). This definition is important as it contrasts interdisciplinary with "multidisciplinarity" wherein

different disciplines with a common aim or concern combine their tools and talents to better address, understand, or resolve a problem that they may have in common but which none can resolve alone. For my project and for practical considerations, this turns out to be a relevant distinction, and it informs my formulation of a Rhetorical Model of autism that functions distinctly but in conjunction with existing Medical and Social Models of autism. The portrayal of autism in popular culture, in this regard, is not a problem to be solved; instead, it is a cultural phenomenon to be interrogated, critiqued, and understood as an active apparatus that does rhetorical work in the real world, work that is not or that cannot be performed by other models. Rather than a condition to be studied passively in clinical terms or interactively as a condition necessitating input from parents, teachers, and other stakeholders within the autism community, autism in popular culture and as a distinct cultural artifact performs as a dynamic agent driven by and promoting a cultural need.¹⁵

Part of what necessitates an interdisciplinary approach is a contemporary cultural trend to equate autism with technocentrism and the existential uncertainty that comes from being human in a digital world. With increasing frequency, popular portrayals of autism and savant syndrome have come to reflect and drive a cultural fascination with and pursuit of an idealized and romanticized human-computer hybrid. The nature of autism and its increasing and simultaneous presence as a lived condition, a neurological enigma, a societal concern, a family reality, and, more frequently, as a literary construct, make an interdisciplinary course of study not just reasonable but a necessity as a means of understanding the condition as a cultural phenomenon and for the purposes of rounding out existing autism-related scholarship.

¹⁵ Here I invoke Slavoj Žižek who points out that “cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn’t give you what you desire. It tells you how to desire.”

Although my project represents an unexplored aspect of autism, the interdisciplinary nature of my approach is in keeping with a trend in the academy to recognize the limitations of strictly disciplinary approaches to multi-faceted phenomena such as autism as rhetorical cultural constructs. Today, autism has become a hot button issue in the clinical world while at the same time, the worlds of Hollywood, media, and popular culture have latched onto certain elements of autism to serve a performative purpose. Interdisciplinarity is the common space that allows these two monologues to be heard as an enriched and mutually-beneficial dialogue.

One of the key elements of interdisciplinarity involves the necessity of adding something new to a discourse that either has not or else cannot be addressed effectively within the confines of an established discipline. Through my research and analysis of autism in media and popular culture, I intend to add to the field of interdisciplinarity by advancing the possibility for a juxtaposition of empiricism and subjective representation. Instead of decrying discrepancies between clinical diagnostic imperatives and the often imprecise or exaggerated portrayals of autism in media, I intend to demonstrate that the two, far from being mutually-exclusive, are interdependent. Literary and media representations, although subject to imprecision and exaggeration, nevertheless enable a better understanding of, if not the autistic condition itself, then at least of role autism plays in an understanding of the human as a social being, as technologically-mediated, and as irretrievably fascinated with the relationship between technological advancements and cognitive potential. Clinical, disability, media, and pop culture studies each examines autism from a specific disciplinary perspective and with specific discipline-based goals. The interdisciplinary nature of rhetoric enables me to occupy the spaces between disciplines, to expose the framework of autism as a performative mechanism, and to reveal autism's function as a produced and consumed cultural commodity. As such a commodity,

autism has been acquired as a convenient metaphor for the neuro-techno integration, or “the singularity,” commonly speculated throughout science fiction as the next stage of techno-human integration and evolution.¹⁶

The 1960s saw a similar acquisition of a neurological disorder when the era’s counter-culture latched onto schizophrenia as a metaphor for drug-inspired sensations of having broken through to an ethereal plane inaccessible through traditional means of world-interpretation and sensory perception. An effort to capture or to reclaim some sort of romanticized internal “Indianness” or otherwise altered, non-normative, non-Western state of perception, spilled over into the popular culture of the time in iconic literature and films like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and in the psychedelic boundary-busting works of the Beats. Schizophrenia was to the counter-culture movement what autism potentially is to modern technocentric, post-anthropocentric movements. In the same way that schizophrenia captured the imagination of and reflected an ideology of the 1960s counter-culture, autism provides a tangible and relatively accessible entryway for reconciling the technological world with the would-be technological mind, which appears to have become the new, idealized version of being human in the Western world. In step with the exponential rise and relevance of computer technology, Ken Kesey’s 6’8” Indian has been supplanted in the last half century by autistic characters such as Spock, Rain Man, Abed Nadir, Sheldon Cooper, and Sherlock Holmes. For both autism and for schizophrenia, transitioning codes of masculinity, alternative understandings of perception, and epistemic challenges to human ontology are encapsulated in popular culture by way of a

¹⁶ The singularity, which I will reference throughout the following chapters, is an idea commonly associated with futurists such as Ray Kurzweil who speculates a moment at the end of the current trajectory of technological innovation when human consciousness will merge with and become indiscernible from digitally-programmed networks in the ultimate manifestation of self-aware artificial intelligence (Kurzweil).

metaphorized neurological disability. The cultural need to ask existential questions is the same; what has changed is the rhetorical mechanism by which that need is met.

While schizophrenia allows for the interdisciplinary leap from psychology to cinema, autism and savantism add the technological twist so relevant in today's plugged-in society. In other words, autism can best be understood only when the clinical is married to the cultural. An enigmatic neurological condition by its nature, autism, perhaps more than any other neurological condition or disorder, can be understood best in its cultural context. Representation in popular culture, therefore, reflects an attempt to comprehend the otherwise incomprehensible. Those studying autism in the isolation of the clinic or completely within the confines of quotidian lived experiences may understand the characteristics of the condition but will be unlikely to connect one with the other or to understand that connection as a key to understanding autism as a metaphorized indicator of an idealized state of human evolution. This would represent an evolution from the conception of the cyborg as a modified man and from the conception of the computer as a modifiable machine to a portrayal of the autistic as a unified synthesis of human (and particularly of male) potential in a technological world.

I have fashioned my dissertation to serve as a cornerstone contribution to the field of interdisciplinary studies as illustrative of the way that interdisciplinarity can fill gaps in a primarily clinical, scientific, and discipline-bound field. In this regard, cultural portrayals of autism represent an important next step in understanding the condition. Literary, media, and pop cultural occurrences serve as a handy incubator for the development of autism beyond the laboratory and freed from the often conflicting and confusing confines of quantitative studies and clinical examinations. Such studies and their approaches have their place, of course, but the goals in autism research, like the condition, comprise a spectrum. Each job necessitates a different tool.

A clinical approach with its attendant methodology works well for responding to questions regarding etiology, epidemiology, and treatment. Such methodologies will be naturally less effective in responding to autism as a portrayed “white condition” or as one that reinforces performative notions of male hegemony. Similarly, an ethnographic study of autism as a racial construct in popular culture may fail to account for discrepancies between represented autism and the realities of autism as a lived condition. My invocation of interdisciplinarity draws upon a variety of methodological approaches to arrive at a valid, unique, and unifying approach that respects disciplinary conditions without being beholden to or limited by them. My argument, therefore, challenges the notion of autism as a strictly neurological condition that must be confined solely to the clinic, to the family, or to the classroom. I seek instead to extrapolate a greater overall understanding of the condition and of its function through an exploration of its use and occasional misuse or misinterpretation in literature, TV, and film.

In many ways, there is ample scholarship and research regarding autism. Psychologists, neurologists, child and youth advocates, and other related experts have done comprehensive work in the field and have a wealth of resources at their disposal. Disciplinary scholarship related to autism abounds. Simon Baron-Cohen has done extensive work in the field of autism as a potentially neurological and genetically-prescribed “male” condition. Scholars such as Jordynn Jack and Stuart Murray have approached autism in gendered, cultural terms. And certainly, Hollywood has not been shy about arrogating autism for its own commercial purposes. My project attempts to do what has not yet been done. Expanding upon existing studies, I ask how cultural manifestations and representations of the condition reflect the gulf between what is known about autism and what consumer culture wants and needs autism to be.

If autism is culturally constructed from “matrices of social practices” and is indeed not a thing but a “nominal rhetorical category” (Nadesan 9), then a Rhetorical Model of the portrayed condition is an appropriate complement to the Medical and Social Models. In keeping with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who, in homage to Simone de Beauvoir, insists that “one is not born disabled, but rather one becomes disabled” (Garland-Thomson), the autistic figure, both real and imaged, is a construct of neurotypical needs and of imposed cultural binarisms including but not limited to often arbitrary, nebulous, and often harmful distinctions between “abled” and “disabled,” “fitting” and “misfitting,” and “normate” and “non-normate” (Garland-Thomson). In this sense, one is not born autistic, nor does one “become autistic” (as that implies a passive, spontaneously-arrived at state of being); instead, a visual rhetorical cast of the unmarked white male imprints autism and its attendant characteristics onto certain susceptible individuals to suit a set of cultural needs and expectations.

CHAPTER 2: Generic Autism – Spock’s Children and Media Representation

ARGUMENT – AUTISTIC LICENCE, GENERIC JUSTIFICATION

In this chapter, I argue that autism as a lived condition and as a rhetorical construct can best be understood in the context of genre. Unique within disability studies, the autistic serves as a prototype for a new locus on the spectrum of masculinity. Autism performs rhetorical functions that sometimes overlap with those of the existing disability genre; at other times, autism, as a commercially manufactured product, functions quite differently. The autistic character, therefore, must not be conflated with the physically disabled, the learning disabled, the deaf, the blind, the deformed, the grotesque, the schizophrenic, or any of the other characters who populate the larger disability genre. Far more than conventional physical and neurological disabilities, autism presents as a truly enigmatic condition with unknown causes, wide-ranging effects, and hotly debated treatment plans. Significantly, a multi-coloured jigsaw puzzle piece, originally designed by Gerald Gasson, father of an autistic child, is currently the universally used symbol of autism. Rather than a puzzle to be solved, however, autism has become a tool in the service of reinforcing Humanist, hegemonic notions of masculinity and of ethnic whiteness. Among the unique characteristics that make this possible are the fact of autism’s yet unknown etiology, its disproportionate diagnosis in Caucasians and males, its tendency to be portrayed as a super ability as much as a disability, and its kinship, by way of its equation with savantism, to the digital information networks of the 21st century. Beyond the autistic’s narrative function, it is the

fact of the autistic's physical appearance, in what I refer to as an "autism aesthetic,"¹⁷ that largely justifies my argument in visual rhetorical terms. Unlike non-white ethnic groups, women, the physically disabled, the so-called freaks, and other historically marginalized groups, the autistic appears as non-prosthetic, able-bodied, occasionally super abled-bodied, predominately male and predominately white and therefore physically "normal." No other disabled character can make that claim. While the existing disability genre is large enough to encompass autism, it is also large enough to lose it.

Like stock characters in other genres, the autistic character both reflects and informs cultural identities. It speaks to audiences as much as it is spoken about. A pioneer in generic and pop culture studies, John Cawelti recognizes the importance of genre, not as a closed off system of formulaic categorization, but as a type of language with etymological roots deeply ingrained in and inseparable from the culture from which it springs and which it also reflects. Cawelti insists that "genre can be defined as a structural pattern which embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language; formula, on the other hand, is cultural; it represents the way in which a culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in narrative form" (205). Whether it is the damsel in distress of Fairy Tales, the jock-cheerleader-nerd triangle of the Teen Film, the lone cowboy of the Western, the hyper-emotional entanglements of Melodrama, or the star-crossed lovers of Romance, genre both feeds and is fed by a certain level of cultural myth. For autism, the visual rhetorics and the cultural formula that develops in symbiosis with the "materials of language" represent the essence of the ouroboros

¹⁷ While Tobin Siebers describes "disability aesthetics" as referring primarily to "a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation" (2), I will be using the concept of aesthetics to refer to the look, behaviours, mannerisms, conduct, and physiognomy of the portrayed autistic figure.

that is the popular understanding of autism that feeds its intergeneric nature that, in turn, feeds popular understandings of autism.

I am compelled from the beginning to draw special attention to Cawelti's invocation of "mythical archetypes" as there is an implicit understanding in portrayals of autism that the transition of autism from clinical condition to a mythology of metaphorized hypermasculinity or to representative of techno-human hybridity is both a threat and a promise. Literary critic Leslie Fiedler also offers a helpful insight into the role of myth in relation to disability narrative. To understand the role of the "freak" or the "disabled," he writes,

we must understand what "myths" really are: namely, projections of certain unconscious impulses otherwise confessed only in our dreams, but which once raised to the level of full consciousness serve as grids of perception through which we screen so-called "reality." When these myths are embodied in literature, translated into words on the page or images on TV, they become part of our daily experience, as "real" as any other.

(Tyranny 34)

Fiedler's "grids of perception" are reflected in Cawelti's "patterns," in Rick Altman's "structures," and in Victoria McGeer's use of the language of genre in describing human social development when she references such concepts as the "normative shape of recognizable social 'forms,' 'normative structures,' 'scaffolding,' and 'predictable outcome,' all as constitutive of our shared folk-psychological expertise" (520). Myths are not spontaneous occurrences or deliberately contrived tools of social regulation; rather, myths are produced by a culture as a means of externalizing something inherently internal. In the case of autism, popular fears of and fascination with the atypical and abnormal combine to generate a character through whom those

fears and fascinations can be channeled. The intergeneric nature of the autistic is the conduit by which this happens.

Establishing autism both intergeneric and uniquely extrageneric is central to understanding how autism is produced and perceived, both as a mythologized and as a lived condition. As in intergeneric figure, the autistic traverses generic boundaries; as an extrageneric figure, the autistic functions as a multi-purpose template that can be moulded to produce characters that reflect certain cultural needs. Such, generic identification allows for a framing in visual rhetorical terms that prevents slippage into a more generalized engagement with existing generic representations of disability. These generic parameters function as a laboratory from which portrayed autism can be most effectively studied and from which reasonable arguments can be made about its function in a larger cultural context. The assembly of a new generic catalogue enables a more accurate and comprehensive examination of autism in both clinical and cultural terms while avoiding confusion between real and represented manifestations of autism and allowing for a robust rhetorical analysis.

Because this chapter deals with genre and because genre necessitates categories, taxonomies, indexes, and inventories, I will illustrate several of my arguments with annotated lists. In each case, I will define my terms, illustrate their application, and justify their place in the context of my larger argument. Using this and other methodological strategies derived from the fields of genre theory and media studies, I have identified certain imperatives for the autistic as a intergeneric character spanning literature, TV, and film. Especially helpful in providing a framework for my proposal for an inter- and extrageneric function of the autistic character are Jason Mittell's five principles of cultural genre analysis that he outlines in his article "A

Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory.” These principles are presented in his concluding remarks as the following subheadings:

- 1) Genre Analyses Should Account for the Particular Attributes of the Medium,
- 2) Genre Studies Should Negotiate Between Specificity and Generality,
- 3) Genre Histories Should Be Written Using Discursive Genealogies,
- 4) Genres Should Be Understood in Cultural Practice, and
- 5) Genres Should Be Situated Within Larger Systems of Cultural Hierarchies and Power Relations (Mittell 54)

Without such a framework, the autistic character runs the risk of being dismissed as an eccentric, stock side-kick. Establishing his presence based on specific generic criteria highlights the autistic’s relevance as a vital character within and across genres. Collectively, these five principles, each of which I will discuss below in turn, provide a supportive encapsulation for the critical analysis that I will undertake of an intergeneric autistic character.

First, autism as genre presents as varied, although consistent in its variation, across media with TV as the primary domain of the neurotypical-autistic bromance, literature as the home of the adolescent male autistic and ersatz detective, and film as the medium that most often addresses interpersonal, romantic, and, infrequently, sexual relationships. Second, autism as intergeneric negotiates between specificity and generality by beginning with the individual manifestation of the condition as a novelty and progressing, over time, into an examination of “how genres transcend textual boundaries and operate within audience and industry practices as well” (56). Third, as Mittell suggests, “we should follow the model of Foucauldian genealogy, emphasizing breadth over depth, and collecting as many discursive instances surrounding a given instance of generic process as we can” (56). Fourth, autism as intergeneric enables a

supplemental examination of how the condition as a clinical reality is “operated and constituted in everyday life” in a study of “the discourses that constitute the category before examining the texts that seem limited by the genre” (57). Finally, collecting instances of spectrum disorders under the common umbrella of an intergeneric autism paradigm allows for a Foucauldian understanding of genre as “constituted by power relations” where genres “are not neutral categories but are situated within larger systems of power and thus come ‘fully loaded’ with political implications” (58). The “political implications” of this final category represent the foundation of my argument that the autistic character must be read as a rhetorical means for the promotion of a 21st century reconfigured masculinity based increasingly on intellect and, by extension, on the assertion of the male mind as somehow more closely aligned with contemporary digital technology (read: power) systems.

The generic space I intend to carve out will serve as the laboratory for a rhetorical analysis of a complex neurological condition, as a re-imagination of the disability narrative, and as generative of an extraordinary character who challenges long-held, culturally-inscribed notions of white male hegemony and reinforces others all at the precise intersection where posthumanist notions of masculinity and technology coalesce within popular imagination. Regarding the pervasiveness of autism as a zeitgeist condition and its eclipsing of existing generic borders, Victoria McGeer recognizes that,

[T]aken as a whole, the genre attests to the fact that autism has escaped the bounds of the subcultural...[It] has features that are familiar, recognizable, portrayable – so much so that the “characters” with autism are now appearing in fiction, assuming a place in the common stock of personalities that walk through the pages of make-believe, however highbrow or lowbrow these may be. (519)

Identifying the presence of the autistic character as “common” is, of course, simply the first step in my proposal for a generic function of autism. But it is a necessary step and one that warrants a closer look at how generic characters are established before I move on to identify how such characters must be read and what their construction and presence mean in the space between the worlds of fiction and of cultural reality.

Autism, I am prepared to argue, cannot be fully understood without the circumscribed authority of a defined generic purpose. If I am to make what people will call a “western,” (or sci-fi or melodrama, etc.) then I need certain recognizable characters, images, settings, and themes. If I am going to make what I identify here as an extrageneric autism template (based on a set of identifiable character, plot, rhetorical devices, and narrative structural elements that show up in discernable ways with recognizable patterns) then I need to draw from a checklist of identifiable generic imperatives including characters’ physiognomy, role and function, relationship dynamics, as well as shared narrative structures, symbols, themes, and motifs within the created world navigated by the autistic.

To justify the role of autism in genre and to further my overall argument, I will first establish a trajectory of the autistic’s presence within the larger literary and cinematic disability genre. This sub-section of the chapter involves tracking the development of the disability genre, identifying the moment when autism splits away from the rest of that genre, making a case for the reasons behind and the effects of that separation, and laying the groundwork for the creation of and justification for an intergeneric autistic based on examples I have culled from a variety of texts from literature, TV, and film. Following that, I will demonstrate the existence, necessity, and function of intergeneric autism and examine specific visual rhetorical strategies used in the representation of the condition. In proposing a generic function of autism, I argue for what has

become an autism prototype that includes generic patterns in the autistic character including physiognomy, point of view, language, detective/alien tropes, relationships, and eccentricities. Collecting examples and commonalities is an indispensable first step in my larger project of illustrating the autistic's role at the crux of transitioning codes of whiteness and masculinity and how those codes intersect with disability in an era of pervasive digital networking. I then transition from generic commonalities to the socio-cultural relevance and functions of autism in portrayal. I conclude with an examination of how today's portrayals serve a pedagogical purpose for understanding the condition in the future, for the genre's ability to inform and misinform audiences about autism, and for its meta-instructional ability to identify masculinity in a state of crisis with the autistic techno-savant as an embodied response to that crisis.

Genre scholar Rick Carpenter offers a catalogue of questions concerning disability in general but equally applicable to autism in particular and especially relevant to my argument:

How is disability being used within this text? What is disability doing? For what activity system is this text a typified response? To what recurring condition or situation? What specific social action is it mediating? How might the text be reproducing the very conditions or situation to which it is responding? More broadly, a metageneric perspective helps to connect a particular genre to other genres: Does disability function similarly in other genres?

As I respond to Carpenter's questions, the core of my analysis will be the postulation that material forms of representation contain a prescription, buried beneath the surface of rhetorical constructions, for the autistic as embodying anthropocentric hopes and fears about the nature of what it means to be a man in a time of transitioning understandings of masculinity. Masculinity, not unlike autism, has come to be understood as a spectrum rather than as a monolithic, fixed,

and permanent state of being; intergeneric autism provides an ideal opportunity for those spectrums to converge. The result, I believe, will be a more complete understanding of ways that many 21st century social movements challenge conventions of masculinity and white hegemony and of the ways that autism has been packaged and repurposed in a form that represents a response to those challenges.

AUTISM IN ACTION – GENERIC GENERATION

Since the commercial success of *Rain Man* in 1988, the autistic savant – an individual with impaired social skills accompanied by superhuman abilities, often in memory or mathematics – has gained an increasingly solid foothold in popular imagination. Modern portrayals, both factual and fictionalized, bring light to a complex neurological issue. This light is sometimes accurate, often distorted, and always compelling. Referencing Ian Hacking’s assertion of an “autistic narrative,” genre scholar Victoria McGeer points out that “[i]n the past thirty years, there has been an explosion of works bringing an entirely new genre into being” (518). Hacking agrees that “autism is a new genre” as opposed to “expert reports by clinicians or reflections by theorists, but stories about people with autism...” (1467). Such insights are both valuable and problematic since they set a course for inclusion, but they do so by way of differentiation, an act with a potentially re-marginalising effect, especially given the gap between clinically-described, lived, and rhetorically-portrayed autism. In his article “Autism Functions / The Function of Autism,” Stuart Murray sites Leonard Cassuto’s insistence that the clinical case study itself “is one of the most powerful tools of the Western medical profession. As a genre with tendentiously objective connotations, it became the vehicle by which rationally based

medical science turned the disabled person into a medical narrative” (orig. 119). I draw special attention to this idea as the juxtaposition of “tools” and “narrative” point to the exact rhetorical nature of portrayed autism that I am seeking to unpack.

Genre scholars such as Victoria McGeer and autism scholars such as Ian Hacking and Stuart Murray open the door for autism to be discussed in cultural terms as a collection of narratives and created characters, but they do not necessarily go far enough in examining how this collection of characters and stories has come about, its function, or the rhetorical devices that are employed in its production. Although McGeer focuses “not on the larger genre of autism narrative but on the smaller subset consisting of autistic autobiographies and other forms of self-report” because “autistic self-narratives are really at the epicenter of this phenomenon” (519), it is imperative that my genre analysis expand beyond the clinical and autobiographical accounts of autism. While it is tempting from a clinical point of view to restrict analysis to diagnosed autistics and to the non-fiction films and other media in which they appear, dismissing fictionalised depictions, no matter how romanticised or inaccurate, ignores the cultural productions and perceptions of the condition. These conditions are indispensable tools in a comprehensive study and understanding of autism as a lived, experienced, represented, produced, and consumed condition. I place emphasis, therefore, on fictionalised portrayals and on their function as a rhetorical means of addressing both disability and the cultural utility of fictional autistics. Whether a given portrayed character under consideration meets the six or seven diagnostic imperatives for autism spectrum disorder is immaterial to my argument. Given the fluid nature of such imperatives and of their definitions as delineated by the periodically revised *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, diagnosing fictional characters is impossible. Autism is usually diagnosed in subjective terms by teams consisting of

parents, family members, teachers, counselors, and clinicians. My interest is not in whether fictional characters qualify as According-to-Hoyle autistics. What matters is why and with what effect the spectrum of autistic characteristics is manipulated as a pop culture phenomenon within the larger context of unstable modes of cultural ethno- and phallocentrism. Significant neurotypical exposure to autism spectrum disorders surely comes primarily through represented figures. It is likely that a greater number of people are more familiar with “Rain Man” than they are with living autists such as memoirists Donna Williams and Tito Mukhopadhyay or autistic savants such as Daniel Tammet and David Wiltshire. My attempt to argue for an intergeneric function of autism is not intended to minimize the importance of studying clinically diagnosed individuals; instead, my intention is to demonstrate the ways that popular portrayals help to round out a study not only of autism but of neurotypical perceptions of the condition and how such perceptions inform and are cyclically informed by the way certain autistic features, from psyche to physiognomy, are collected and assembled to form a fictional autistic character. This character, as I will demonstrate, performs a unique and specific rhetorical function across media and throughout popular culture.

At the time that I am writing this, there are at least forty or fifty movies featuring a diagnosed autistic character. Another thirty or so characters appear on TV, mostly in detective or medical shows. Dozens more autistic characters appear in novels, and a growing number of literary and historical figures such as Mozart, Sherlock Holmes, Alan Turing, Bobby Fischer, and Andy Warhol are being speculatively diagnosed *ex post facto* within the autism and pop culture communities. With growing public awareness of autism, a unique stock character is poised to usher in and to occupy a new, independent, and identifiable generic function. Based on the genre analysis of Victoria McGeer, John Cawelti, Rick Carpenter, and Jason Mittell, rhetoric

scholar Jay Dolmage, literary critic Leslie Fiedler, and autism scholars Stuart Murray, Simon Baron-Cohen, and Ian Hacking, I propose that portrayals have come to reflect a romanticised notion of the autistic, especially of what I have dubbed the autistic “techno-savant,” increasingly as the embodiment of an idealized techno-human singularity. With certain exaggerated traits of clinical autism and savantism cherry-picked as signifiers of the condition, the intergeneric autistic serves as pedagogically informative and simultaneously as a source of misrepresentation. I will argue that there is value inherent in understanding both functions.

The birth of the intergeneric autistic, perhaps already on the threshold of adolescence, informs and is informed by a conventional, body-based idea of masculinity that now finds itself in a period of radical flux. Hegemonic power, traditionally the domain of the able-bodied, heteronormative male, is becoming relocated from the tangible, abled body to the neurological, intellectual, and digitally-networked mind. Embedded in and foundational to intergeneric autism is the notion that masculinities within patriarchal power structures are fueled by the technology of the time. Simply put, power has historically resided in the hands that, through acts of violence or matters of prioritized class, religious dogma, or random chance, have wielded that era’s most advanced technology. In the cultural West, that epistemic connection has historically run through the hands of white, heteronormative, able-bodied men, the exact demographic now in danger of being either supplanted or saved by the autistic techno-savant, the posthuman wielder of bio-technic power. That technologic access has become increasingly the domain of the computer-like intellectual, a phenomenon that can be traced to Alan Turing’s Enigma Machine and to his eponymous Turing Test. Turing’s test was designed originally with a focus on sociological and neurological gender differences but later morphed into a means of assessing a computer’s degree

of simulated human consciousness.¹⁸ This is arguably the moment that postmodernist notions of identity and subjectivity as intertwined with digital technology were born. Rhetorician Jay Dolmage refers to authors who “suggest we need ‘a desire that creates a new body; a metamorphosis that breaks all the naturalistic homologies of modernity’” (*Multitude* 216). He argues further on these phenomenological lines that “the will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of submitting to command...incapable of adopting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth. (If you find your body refusing these ‘normal’ modes of life, don’t despair—realize your gift!)” (98). While Dolmage does not mention autism specifically, his description aligns well with the autistic and what the autistic represents: a posthuman man with access to power by way of bio-technic access. The autistic is the one who resists indoctrination, rejects empathy, is immune from sexual desire, and who personifies the incarnation of a techno-human teleology. The romanticization of autism as a gift, rather than ignored as unproblematic, must be understood as an integral element of autism in and between genres. Autism, unlike other physical or neurological conditions within the larger disability genre, possesses the potential to displace the abled, to overcome the normal, and to “out-human the humans” (Collins 2004). Without this distinction, the autistic might arguably be shuttled, along with schizophrenics and the physically disabled, under the broader disability genre. It is the fact and the nature of the enigmatic essence of autism and of the popular tendency to sensationalize and even to apotheosize the autistic that justifies viewing autism as a distinct intergeneric entity with embedded semiotic clues leading to a more robust understanding of the relationship between and convergence of masculinity, ethnic whiteness, and technology.

¹⁸ In its most basic form, the Turing Test situates a human subject behind a screen. That subject engages in a blind conversation with what may be either a computer or another human being. A computer that successfully convinces the subject that he/she is speaking to another human being is said to have “passed the Turing Test” and can be construed as a working example of artificial intelligence.

Movies, texts, and television shows about disabilities are nothing new. There is a long literary and cultural history of the Western consumer being drawn to the thing that he has most offended and which he finds the most offensive, the thing that is other than the normative self and the figure that enables subjectivity through an exclusionary juxtaposition with otherness, a concept I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter. Examples in the disability genre have historically centered around certain common elements. These include a distancing from and simultaneous morbid attraction to aberration, curiosity about sexual dynamics and practices among the disabled community, what such practices mean to valued definitions of neuro- and heteronormativity, the viewer or reader positioned atop the moral high-ground for being able to see the soul of the disabled where others see only the grotesque, and the ultimate redemption of normative society based on that society's self-described ability to accept the outsider as a symbol of what it sees as its most salient virtues of inclusivity, diversity, acceptance, and self-improvement. Autism encapsulates these essential elements while diverging in several key ways that necessitate rigorous analysis.

The autistic in representation is frequently portrayed as having compensatory super powers, usually manifested as mathematical or techno-savantism, that elevate him above his neurotypical, able-bodied counterpart in a way not seen in other disability narratives of overcoming. Autism is a mostly invisible condition, which prevents autistics from being an "easy subject for novelists. Their interests are prescribed, their experiences static, their interaction with others limited" (Hacking 1469). Ian Hacking, unfortunately, stops here. Although true, it does not suffice to observe that social interactions of the autistic are simply limited. Instead, a more thorough analysis reveals that the limitations are frequently re-directed into homoerotic relationships between an adult male autistic and a neurotypical protagonist, a bromantic

relationship that I will analyse in detail in Chapter 4, or else the social limitations are compensated for by practical contributions as seen in narratives featuring a young autistic male, often a savant or amateur detective, whose role involves solving a crime or resolving a mystery with the subtext that he is, in reality, solving some real mystery of neurotypical behaviour. Although they have roots in clinically described autistic behaviour, such representations present as embellishments on a lived neurological condition.

A mixed sense of accuracy in representation is important as no generic taxonomy can be complete without acknowledging the exceptions. Because generic parameters comprise certain elements of convention and certain equally necessary elements of invention, a push-pull binarism is inevitable. In keeping with conventional wisdom regarding the origins and nature of genre, I have identified, existing necessarily in the same narrative space, evolutionary foundational baseline elements coupled with revolutionary flourishes that together satisfy the requisite need for the convention and invention that constitute generic framing. In his analysis of the overlooked parallels between disability and genre theory, Rick Carpenter notes that

[i]n many respects, the reconceptualization of genre over the past few decades mirrors that of disability. Just as disability scholars and activists reject rigid categories of fixed difference based solely on individual deviations from some supposedly neutral norm, so too have contemporary genre theorists rejected the traditional view of genre as static categories of discourse that share certain objective conventional features. (Carpenter 2011)

The relationship between disability and genre should not be taken lightly nor considered as coincidental as both have at their core rigid taxonomies, a reliance on diagnostic imperatives, and

the inevitability of accounting for individual variance within larger, imperfect often pseudo-scientifically delineated groups.

The rejection of categories as “rigid” or “static” aligns well with my advocacy of intergeneric autism and further justifies my need to smooth out genre’s blurred boundaries. Beyond generic criteria, genre is equally definable by what it is not. Before delving into the generic imperatives present in the intergeneric autistic, I find it helpful to outline the cases on the periphery. I locate autism’s generic boundaries where the exceptions exist. These boundaries illustrate where the autism within genre might be headed, how it might change over time, and the ways that such variances in direction contribute to an understanding of autism as a cultural text capable and deserving of rhetorical analysis.

Examples of intergeneric autism embody conformance to generic norms but with just enough invention to provide the illusion of originality within the confines of convention. According to genre scholar John Cawelti,

Convention and invention have quite different cultural functions. Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of values; inventions confront us with a new perception or meaning, which we have not realized before. Both of these functions are important to culture. Conventions help maintain a culture’s stability while inventions help it respond to changing circumstances and provide new information about the world. (204)

As a spectrum condition, autism personifies these generic elements of convention and invention. While autism presents with certain diagnostic imperatives, it also encompasses a wide range of personality traits, eccentricities, abilities, and limitations. Conventional wisdom, often attributed to blogger Dr. Stephen Shore but repeated throughout the autism community, says that “If

you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." This discrepancy between generic convention and invention and between autism as generalised and as individualised occupies the same rhetorical space and serves the same rhetorical function. In Cawelti's terms, the discrepancy does the rhetorical work of maintaining autism's "stability" while providing "new information" about autism as an expansive spectrum condition.

Genre requires a cultural fascination with a combination of main character, plot, theme, style, moral, goal, peripheral characters, villain, patterns, and predictability. The patterns must be recognizable. They must appear with a certain expectedness coupled perforce with something novel, a twist or take on its predecessors. After a critical mass has been reached and with a common frame of reference, these films can be discussed in generic terms. As with most examples within genre, however, there is often an element of the novel, a surprise or a new angle that puts a twist on what has come before. These are variations on a theme, the exceptions that highlight the rules. Intergeneric autism provides unique variations on the presentation of autism as a neurological condition and on its salient presence as a cultural phenomenon. Branching off from the generic imperatives clinically assigned to autism, autism throughout genre tends to comprise the following six variants:

First, there is The Female Autistic: In the *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series, the autistic techno-savant is a sexualized and bi-sexual woman. In *Snow Cake*, Sigourney Weaver plays "Linda," atypically an autistic woman but still typical of autism across genre in that she presents as isolated, asocial, enigmatic, and asexual. Dr. Temperance "Bones" Brennan (Emily Deschanel), a female forensic anthropologist, and Saga Norén (Sofia Helin), a female Swedish detective, of the crime-dramas *Bones* and *The Bridge*, respectively, are often cited as possessing

spectrum traits of rigid devotion to logic, lack of empathy, and limited social skills accompanied by exceptional intelligence and extraordinary skills in reasoning and problem-solving.

Second is The Associative Autistic: The films *Adam* and *Mozart and the Whale* contain a rare example of the direct address of courtship and romance in a heteronormative relationship. The novel *The Rosie Project*, its sequel *The Rosie Effect*, and the documentary *Autism in Love* also address these issues in a more fundamental way than is seen elsewhere in pop culture representations of autism.

Third is The Artificial Autistic: In *Lucy*, Scarlett Johansson portrays an in-over-her-head ingénue who, by accidental exposure to a man-made super-narcotic evolves from a sexualized drug mule into an asexual, chemically-engineered, logic-driven, and emotionless techno-savant who climactically disappears into the ether as the disembodied personification of technology itself.

Fourth is The Acting Autistic: In *Phenomenon*, George Malley (John Travolta) develops and then loses his extraordinary savant skills. In this case, the autistic characteristics are acquired, explained, and ultimately lost leaving the viewer to consider the consequences of a biologically reconfigured human ontology in intellectual terms.

Fifth is The Alien Autistic: In *Star Trek*, the autistic techno-savant, frequently referred to metaphorically as an alien or as a computer, is embodied by Spock, a literal alien. This dynamic appears as well in Alton Meyer (Jaeden Liberher) of *Midnight Special* where Alton, possessed of autistic traits, comes from a parallel world that sits invisibly on top of Earth.

Sixth is The Artistic Autistic: In *Community*, Abed (Danny Pudi) is a Middle-Eastern autistic techno-savant who, although still possessed of a prodigious memory, specializes in popular culture rather than in science or mathematics. Living examples of the Artistic Autistic

include autistic savant and artist Stephen Wiltshire who is known as “the human camera,” Ellen Boudreaux who is autistic and blind but who can play any piece of music after only a single hearing, and David Paravicini who is also a blind, autistic music savant.

Although each of these represents a variation on a theme, most of the characteristics inherent in such portrayals adhere to the conventions of autism as genre. These characters continue to possess most of the traits of the autistic or of the autistic techno-savant and they remain purely biological organisms, a generic commonality that unites them while differentiating them from prosthetically-enhanced humans, cyborgs, and other sentient machines. In terms of the relationship between convention and invention in such cases, Janet Staiger in “Hybrid or Inbred” finds that

[p]atterns do exist. Moreover, patterns are valuable material for deviation, dialogue, and critique. Variations from patterns may occur for making a text fresh or for commentary about the issues raised within the standard pattern, and both aesthetic and ideological functions of variations make no sense without the notion of some pattern or order.

Variations within the presentation of autism across media do allow for commentary within the standard pattern, and perhaps some of these variations will eventually branch off into a distinct sub-genre. They may also simply fade over time or be reincorporated into the larger disability genre, or they may yield a distinct genre in the same way that the intergeneric autistic grew from the seeds of the disability genre. The “commentary” that Staiger describes, with its “variations from patterns” and “some pattern or order” gesture toward the rhetoric of portrayed autism as situated between the extremes of clinical prescription and unfettered metaphorization. As extragenetic, the rhetorical function of autism is optimised by existing in this liminal space.

That carved-out space did not spring spontaneously into existence. Instead, it represents the latest stage in the historical trajectory of a disability genre that follows a progressive and predictable pattern. The genre of disability leads from and heads toward the same place only on a different path now. This path is more timely, contemporary, and relevant given recent trends in the exploration of the fluidity of gender and sexuality and of parallel advances in neuroscience and biotechnology that appear to portend the much-anticipated techno-human singularity. In this environment, the autistic is the new outsider, although one decidedly different, one might say more evolved in a technological sense, than his predecessors. The autistic is an inside-outsider. Unlike others within the disability genre, he does not seek acceptance into mainstream society. In fact, he appears withdrawn from it, leaving the neurotypical to ask, “Why don’t you want what I have?” and “Why don’t you desperately want to be what I am?” Such questions strike at the heart of neurotypical self-perception and at the Western Judeo-Christian able-bodied notion of having been made in God’s image. And yet here is a being, albeit a culturally created one, that is more God-like than the world of neurotypicals in his immunity to the fallibilities of greed, lust, avarice, and even empathy, that the neurotypical normally identifies as the cornerstones of his own humanity. As portrayed, the autistic does not indulge in the temptation of immorality. Generally speaking, he does not drink, do drugs, or have either recreational or procreational sex. He does not lust after wealth, power, or fame. He does not seek to acquire equality or to assert his inalienable civil rights. He is possessed of an apparently autonomous subjectivity, a sacrilegious prospect in a culture that defines subjectivity in terms of interrelationality.¹⁹ It is not accidental that this description might just as easily apply to a laptop or an iPhone. If men have historically defined themselves in terms of their relationship to their technology, then the autistic,

¹⁹ James Fisher refers to this sacrilege as “a kind of scandal in a culture where the subject in search of self is virtually equated with what makes us human” (Fisher 51, qtd. in Murray “Autism and the Posthuman”).

in a technocentric era, is poised to be the ultimate man: an anti-social, super-powered intellect housed within a reconfigured phenomenological male body.

Viewed through the lens of autism as a surplus rather than a deficit model, I am able to map the historical progression of the disability genre from bodily to neurological. Western culture has become more familiar with and more accepting of physical disability as such conditions have become medically explainable, treatable, curable, and assimilated. Before the autistic, disability was ranked by the degree to which the condition could be treated or cured, all with an eye toward reinforcing hegemonic, patriarchal power hierarchies of vertical, able-bodied normativity. With the arrival of the autistic, the disability of autism has become an indictment of and threat to the accepted superiority of able-bodied neuro-normativity. Autism, unlike its generic predecessors, remains prone to mythologization. While other represented forms of disability concern themselves with what is missing from the mind or taken away from the body, autism, in its mythologized form, ignores the body, apotheosizes the mind, and inspires new venues for the cultural integration of hegemonic masculinity. My attempt to reveal the underpinnings of a generic function of autism is a necessary step toward demythologizing autism as a condition and revealing its informative role as a performative cultural construct.

Although it has branched off, as illustrated above, autism as a cultural construct has deep roots in the disability genre. To engage this part of my argument, I first need to do the archeological work of unearthing those roots. Historically, as a given disability has become demythologized, the rhetorical discourse surrounding it has transformed. In past incarnations, disability has morphed along a trajectory. At one time, disability took the form of the tragic freak or the misunderstood grotesque (“Quasimodo,” “The Elephant Man” John Merrick, “Frankenstein’s monster,” Roy “Rocky” Dennis from *Mask*, and “Edward Scissorhands”).

Disability next came to represent the more mainstream physically disabled (feel-good stories of triumph like *Rudy* and *The Bionic Man*). It then morphed again to highlight individuals with impaired mental capacity (*Radio* and *Forrest Gump*, for example). Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, disability, accompanied now by super-ability, took the form of savants with eidetic memories, where genius itself, without the comorbidity of autism, is represented as in *Shine*, *Iron Man*, *Phenomenon*, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, *Finding Forrester*, *Pollack*, *Pi*, and *Good Will Hunting*. Then came the classic autistic where the condition was diagnosed or implied, often occurring in literature, as in *The Speed of Dark*, *House Rules*, *Marcelo in the Real World*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, *Loving Mr. Spock*, *Adam*, and *Snow Cake*. The trajectory of disability has now landed on the autistic techno-savant with living figures such as Daniel Tammet and Stephen Wiltshire, fictionalized historic figures such as Mark Zuckerberg (*The Social Network*) and Alan Turing (*The Imitation Game*), and invented characters such as Raymond Babbitt (*Rain Man*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*), Spock (*Star Trek*), Abed Nadir (*Community*), and Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), where the savant has taken on popular (mis)understandings of autism to become the personification of the digital technology with its unempathetic binary “thinking” and control over massive streams of big data.²⁰

If disability and queer theory both challenge norms of heteronormativity and of “compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness” (McRuer 89), then the portrayed autistic as a superheroic, “plugged in” figure adds another layer to this challenge by indicting

²⁰ Although I speak in terms of a “trajectory” and while there is an identifiable general, historical chronology, portrayals of disability nevertheless shift and overlap and should not be thought of as rigid constructions with defined beginnings and endings in popular portrayal. Rather than contriving such a rigid framework, I am more interested in identifying the distinct characters, the way they are perceived, and the rhetorical function they serve in popular culture.

neuronormativity and by calling into question the arbitrary lines between ability, disability, and superability. Unlike the pure savants who are presented as tragically superheroic and clinically disabled, the autistic techno-savant points to a perceived compromise between the superheroic gift of savantism and the supposed “curse” of autism. Such differences between autism and previous incarnations of disability are foundational to an understanding of autism as an embodiment of conventional concepts of masculinity in flux and further justify the need for an understanding of autism’s generic role. In its masculine configuration, disability narrative has traditionally been framed around a man who is less of a man because of his disability and who therefore instills pity, hope, inspiration, and a desire by audiences to bring him into the normative fold. In romanticized representation, the autistic techno-savant represents a potential meta-human and therefore ruptures that narrative.

Within that rupture, the autistic has been seized by pop culture producers to re-entrench certain hegemonic binaries. Rick Carpenter notes that “[m]ore or less explicitly, these texts (and their associative genres) deploy disability in the service of maintaining the hegemony of patriarchy by constructing and privileging an idealized masculinity.” Carpenter goes on to suggest that such disability texts depend on “similar kinds of typified responses because the situation—or ‘problem’—is the same for each of these particular texts: the creation of a normative male body.” Carpenter invokes texts such as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, the character Wolverine from the Marvel Universe, and Superman, perhaps the most embedded, pervasive icon of heteronormative, super able-bodied masculinity available in Western culture. Within its own genre, however, autism diverges from the traditional disability or superheroic narratives where the acquisition of physical hypermasculinity has been the implied or explicit end game. Despite the occasional footnote nod to some glimmer of transformative hope in the

narrative denouement (as when Charlie Babbitt “connects” with his brother “Rain Man”), attempts across genres to normalize autism have, until recently, been met with failure.²¹ There is a dilemma now in the trajectory of the disability genre as the autistic already possesses an able, normative male body and a hyper-masculinized mind reflective of the stereotypical male tendency toward systemization and inflexibility referred to famously (and not without controversy) by British psychologist and autism scholar Simon Baron-Cohen as the “Extreme Male Brain Theory”²² of autism. While other examples of disability have served to reinforce male ableism as the hegemonic apex of human perfection, autism challenges that notion by presenting a posthuman, more-human-than-human, successor who resists rather than covets normative conformity. For Rick Carpenter, the contrivance involves the ways that “an ableist society constructs ‘disability’ and ‘difference’ in ways that create false binaries, marginalize some and privilege others, and deny people rights and opportunities through the erection of material and institutional barriers.” Genre, whether intended or not, can enable such exclusionary practices, hierarchical constructions, and discriminatory politics. Autism may represent both an example of such attempts at generic binaries as well as the means for challenging and extinguishing them.

There is a common socio-political element of intergeneric autism that aims to interrogate the ethics, the epistemological history, and even the etymological basis for neurotypical supremacy, with the goal being to shuffle the neurotypical-autism deck, as it were. Nathaniel Clark in Jennifer Roy’s YA novel *Mindblind* refers to the old joke about people on the spectrum:

²¹ I will argue in Chapter 5 that attempts to “normalize” autism in portrayal are underway and could have serious negative consequences for those living with autism as well as for the represented autistic characters throughout popular culture.

²² According to this controversial, challenged, and socially-divisive theory, autism may be attributable to the presence of excessive fetal testosterone during embryonic development and may be the extreme version of an observed tendency within males to favour systemising over empathising in their engagement with the world.

“How do you get rid of Asperger’s? Stay in a room alone. That’s because an Aspie is only different when there is another human – or group of humans – to compare him to” (81). Lou Arrendale in *The Speed of Dark* actively and aggressively resists the existential threat of an “autism cure.” Max from *Mary and Max* insists that, despite his self-identified challenges, he would not want a cure for his autism. *Rain Man* ends with the conventionally unsatisfying but vindicated moment that sees Raymond, ultimately incurable, return to the institution, a deliberate narrative choice made by director Barry Levinson who “insisted that the poignancy of [Raymond] going back to Walbrook would be more dramatically satisfying for the audience” (Silberman 375 / 534). Beyond the world of fiction, cultural associations such as the Autism Rights Group rigorously reject the terminology of the disability genre and the idea of autism as a disease in need of a cure. Pop culture producers and consumers, perhaps suffering from disability fatigue, have not only enabled but have actively encouraged, developed, and disseminated a variation in the genre that better reflects and represents transitioning codes of the normative male body and of the traditionally masculine self.

Autism is located on the tail end of the disability trajectory for a reason. Autism would fail as a rhetorical construct if it were somehow relocated in space or time. The represented autist would look quite different and perform a radically different function if he were to appear in a non-Western historical context, in American literary texts of the 19th century, or in pre-WWII filmic representation. The autistic appears at a temporal intersection of posthuman interrogations of anthropocentrism, the pluralisation of gendered identity, and a crisis of human subjectivity inspired by exponential advances in digital technologies. Autism as genre begins as an exercise in cataloguing a condition; beyond that, however, it is a means to encapsulate these epistemic dynamics where they converge at the represented autistic.

A TAXONOMY OF AUTISM IN PORTRAYAL

A critical analysis of foundational elements of autism as genre allows for a more robust examination of autism beyond the clinical, psychological, and neurological fields. Certain specific features of living autistics have been harnessed, codified, and repurposed by the literary and film industries to replicate and to perfect a new formula, pre-packaged for easy consumption. That packaging has origins, a structure, discernable messages, and a distinct impact on consumers. Like any commodified advertisement, packaging matters. My creation of a taxonomy of the autistic figure is a rhetorical way of reading that packaging. The autistic has become a commodity manufactured as much by consumers as by producers. Commonalities in the portrayals of autism in Western popular culture reflect perceptions and misperceptions about autism and point to a way of encountering the condition through more accessible, non-clinical channels.

In positing autism as constitutional of a genre, I first identify the condition in its inter-generic capacity. Cutting across generic boundaries, the autistic resists secondary status as a stock character. In the same way that a “type” of character might appear across genre, such as a comic relief sidekick or an elderly sage or an evil henchman, the autistic, originally appearing as an ancillary figure, often a foil and still occasionally although with less frequency the butt of the joke, is in the process of coming into his own as a viable character occupying his own genre. The stock character has become more frequently the de facto star of the show. Johnny Galecki (“Leonard Hofstadter”) is the top-billed star of *The Big Bang Theory*, yet it is Jim Parson’s character “Sheldon Cooper” who invariably captures the popular imagination. According to *Star*

Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, Leonard Nimoy received far more fan mail than did William Shatner, a fact that caused friction between the two stars. The character of Elliot Alderson of *Mr. Robot* situates the autistic techno-savant as globally influential and as a revolutionary gadfly in the face of capitalist techno-hegemony. Because of his compromised agency due to impaired social or communicative abilities, the elevation of the autistic character is still mitigated by the frequent fallback position of being a tool to enable the social and emotional development of a neurotypical protagonist within the narrative. In that sense, the autistic serves as a prosthetic to the neurotypical.

Autism, therefore, and especially autistic savantism, plays a unique and timely role. The autistic techno-savant liberates the autistic from the ashcan of the sympathy-inspiring disability trope. The neurotypical does not need to feel sorry for the autistic in the same way that he does for the quadriplegic, the maimed, the handicapped, or the disabled underdog who inspires through his ability to overcome both his own adversity and the aversion of the able-bodied to be accepted into the very society that has rejected him. The autistic is both ubiquitous and indispensable and, at times, enviable. Although, as literary critic Leslie Fiedler observes in *Tyranny of the Normal*, “Such ersatz sagas of heroic ‘gimps,’ then, merely turn upside down rather than dissolve the sense of immitigable difference which lies at the root of our troubled response to the disabled, by making them seem super- rather than subhuman” (37). In either case, whether sub or super-abled, the autistic, not unlike his predecessors in the disability genre, remains consigned to the sphere of difference and enables neurotypical audiences, especially able-bodied neurotypical men, to re-assert their coveted normalness and to further cement their place as the exemplar for masculinity and, by extension, for all of humanity.

The autistic requires his own genre in part because he transcends existing ones. This is a disabled character who surpasses traditional notions of disability. He is a comedic character who is not funny. He is an attractive character who is not romantic. He is a sexually viable character who is uninterested in sex. He is a science fiction character rooted in modernity. And, for the first time, the neurotypical is presented with a superhero who does not fit into the superhero genre. In this latter case, the autistic is a superheroic character the neurotypical cannot aspire to be. A primary function of the superhero within the superhero genre is to present someone the neurotypical, by way of rigorous training, mishap, or accident of birth, might yet become. Similarly, although in this case packaged as a cautionary tale, a primary function of disability narratives is to put forth a character the neurotypical, by way of atrophy, mishap, or accident of birth, might yet become. The autistic, on the other hand, is unattainable. Although the neurotypical might covet the autistic's savant powers and lament his social introversion, he can neither attain nor unlock the enigmatic, autonomously-developed subjectivity that the autistic represents. This sense of distance, mystery, and independence is part of what makes the autistic attractive as a model of masculinity and as a compelling subject of genre study.

The generic presence of autism manifests as four generic sub-categories that I have identified, codified, and entitled: First, in mainstream and YA fiction, there are "Autarchic Adolescent Autists." These are characters appearing in novels where diagnosed autism or savant syndrome is central to the protagonist's identity, as in *The Rosie Project* (Simsion), *The Rose Effect* (Simsion), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Haddon), *House Rules* (Picoult), *Marcelo in the Real World* (Stork), *Martian Time-Slip* (Dick), *The Poisonwood Bible* (Kingsolver), *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Foer), and *Colin Fischer* (Miller & Stentz). In most of these cases the autistic is a diagnosed adolescent male or a young man on a solo quest

to solve a mystery or to resolve a societal dilemma while along the way revealing (unintentionally to the character but probably intentionally by the writers) some problematic, hypocritical, or enigmatic element of neurotypical society. This is the lone outsider looking in, the “anthropologist on Mars,” as famous autistic savant Temple Grandin once referred to herself in an interview with neurologist Oliver Sacks.

Second, in television and film, there are the “Adjunct Autists.” These are characters, usually autistic techno-savants, who are partnered or who operate in a group and where autism is implied or conceivable based on exhibited diagnosable personality traits. Representative characters include Abed Nadir (*Community*), Sheldon Cooper (*Big Bang Theory*), Spock (*Star Trek*), Elliot Alderson (*Mr. Robot*), and Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*). When implied in these cases, autism tends to be treated coyly, a tongue-in-cheek and hinted-at understanding that this is a spectrum character but that to make the diagnosis official complicates both the internal world of the fiction and an implicit agreement between creators and audiences that a real medical condition must neither be trivialized nor pinned down as an object of investigation or satirization. Interestingly, in the first episode of *Community*, Jeff (Joel McHale) breaks this rule when he tells Abed, “Yeah, well you have Asperger’s.” After that single remark, the writers took great pains to prevent any further such labeling to the point that the discretion became a running joke within the series: In “Advanced Dungeons and Dragons,” Abed is referred to by the narrator as “Abed the Undiagnosable.” In “Regional Holiday Music,” Abed’s Christmas song includes the lyrics, “On the spectrum? None of your business!” In “Virtual Systems Analysis,” Annie rearranges Abed’s simulation of his mental inner processing unit to include “what we lower-functioning brains call empathy,” an act that renders Abed catatonic. In the same episode, Abed’s patient number is revealed as 1373, doubtless a nod to the birthday (January 3, 1973) of

creator Dan Harmon who is a self-proclaimed Aspie. In a meta take on the unutterable nature of autism in fiction and as an attempt potentially to normalize the condition, Abed, in “Horror Fiction in Seven Spooky Steps” (3:5), is revealed to be the only sane, non-sociopathic member of the study group. In other instances within this sub-genre, autism is openly diagnosed and discussed as on the television shows, *House*, *ReGenesis*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Parenthood*, *Boston Legal*, *Alphas*, *Atypical*, and *The Good Doctor* and in films such as *Adam*, *Mozart and the Whale*, *Mercury Rising*, *Silent Fall*, *Mary and Max*, *The Accountant*, and *Rain Man* where autism is a primary focus of and driving force for the plot. In these cases, to be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion of this chapter, there is an expository, pedagogical element designed to bring the audience into the autism fold.

The third autism sub-genre consists of “Extant Autists.” These are figures in documentary literature and film that feature the lives and works of living autistics and autistic savants such as Temple Grandin, John Elder Robison, Donna Williams, Daniel Tammet, Stephen Wiltshire, Tito Mukhopadhyay, Amanda Baggs, and Kim Peek, the original “Rain Man.” These works, although tending toward sensationalism, offer perhaps the most authentic view of the savant mind as told by the autistics themselves. Mainstream, family-centric documentaries such as *Asperger’s Are Us*, *Loving Lampposts*, *Sounding the Alarm*, *Life: Animated*, *The United States of Autism*, and *Autism: The Musical* present ground-level encounters with individuals who are more representative of living autists. Documentaries such as *Autism in Love* specifically explore the idea of romance, although not of sex, on the autism spectrum, and most biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs written by or in conjunction with autistics and autistic savants give the subject of sex a wide berth.

Finally, in what has become a cottage industry in and around the autism community, there are the “Postulated Autists.” These are historical figures who are being speculatively diagnosed ex post facto by clinicians and by producers and consumers of popular culture. These Postulated Autists include Mozart, Sir Isaac Newton, Nikola Tesla, Alan Turning, Bobby Fischer, Andy Warhol, Glenn Gould, Mark Zuckerberg, and others who are known or who are suspected to have exhibited traits of eccentricity, asociality, technocentrism, asexuality or homosexuality, impaired empathy, and a host of other behaviours clinically or commonly associated with autism’s diagnostic imperatives.

The following table illustrates the four intergeneric categories I have identified:

AUTARCHIC-ADOLESCENT AUTISTS / YA LIT.		ADJUNCT AUTISTS / TV & FILM	
Don Tillman, <i>The Rosie Project</i> (Simsion)		Spock (<i>Star Trek</i>)	
Anthony, <i>Love Anthony</i> (Genova)		Abed Nadir (<i>Community</i>)	
Nathaniel Clark, <i>Mindblind</i> (Roy)		Sam Gardner (<i>Atypical</i>)	
Christopher Boone, <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i> (Haddon)		Fred Tate (<i>Little Man Tate</i>)	
Colin, <i>Colin Fischer</i> (Miller & Stentz)		Elliot Alderson (<i>Mr. Robot</i>)	
Keller, <i>Keeping Keller</i> (Winegar)		Max Braverman (<i>Parenthood</i>)	
Adam, <i>Eye Contact</i> (McGovern)		Donald Morton (<i>Mozart and the Whale</i>)	
Oskar Schell, <i>Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close</i> (Foer)		Jake Bohm (<i>Touch</i>)	
Marcelo Sandoval, <i>Marcelo in the Real World</i> (Stork)		Gary Bell (<i>Alphas</i>)	
Jacob Hunt, <i>House Rules</i> (Picoult)		Bob Melnikov (<i>ReGenesis</i>)	
Manfred Steiner, <i>Martian Time-Slip</i> (Dick)		Jerry Espenson (<i>Boston Legal</i>)	
Adah Price, <i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> (Kingsolver)		Simon Lynch (<i>Mercury Rising</i>)	
Marcus Brewer, <i>About a Boy</i> (Hornby)		Tim Warden (<i>Silent Fall</i>)	
Jason Blake, <i>Anything But Typical</i> (Baskin)		Max (<i>Mary and Max</i>)	
Caitlin Smith, <i>Mockingbird</i> (Erskine)		Raymond Babbitt (<i>Rain Man</i>)	
		Linda Freeman (<i>Snow Cake</i>)	
		Alton Meyer (<i>Midnight Special</i>)	
		Adam (<i>Adam</i>)	
		Lisbeth Salander (<i>Dragon Tattoo</i>)	
		Dr. Sheldon Cooper (<i>Big Bang Theory</i>)	
		Sherlock Holmes (<i>Sherlock</i>)	
		Dr. Gregory House (<i>House</i>)	
		Christian Wolff (<i>The Accountant</i>)	
		Dr. Spencer Reid (<i>Criminal Minds</i>)	
		Dr. Temperance Brennan (<i>Bones</i>)	
		Dr. Shaun Murphy (<i>The Good Doctor</i>)	
		Dr. Virginia Dixon (<i>Grey’s Anatomy</i>)	
EXTANT AUTISTS		POSTULATED AUTISTIC SAVANTS	
Temple Grandin		Mozart	
Tito Mukhopadhyay		Sir Isaac Newton	
John Elder Robison		Nikola Tesla	
Donna Williams		Andy Warhol	
Daniel Tammet		Bobby Fischer	
Stephen Wiltshire		Glenn Gould	
Amanda Baggs		Mark Zuckerberg	
Kim Peek		Alan Turing	
David Paravicini			

Figure 1 - Four Autism Intergeneric Categories with Examples

Autistic characters across these four sub-genres tend to present as asexual and are usually isolated and with no real understanding of the neurotypical dynamics of heteronormative relationships. Other than the Extant Autists, they tend to be white males who are rigid in their thinking, highly moral, deeply rooted in the logic of mathematical systems, unempathetic, and seemingly devoid of the need for human contact. There has been speculation among clinicians specializing in autism that perhaps a link exists between elevated levels of testosterone during pre-natal development as contributing to both the intractable need to systematize and to what appears to be a disproportionate occurrence of asexuality and homosexuality on the autism spectrum. Simon Baron-Cohen, for example, cites a study conducted by neurologist Norman Geschwind based on a hypothesis “that foetal testosterone affects the growth rate of the two hemispheres of the brain” (*Essential Difference* 100). This hypothesis, seemingly validated by scientific experimentation and observation, although controversial in its methodology and hardly uncontested, proposes that “the more testosterone you have, the faster your right hemisphere develops and, correspondingly, the slower your left hemisphere develops” leading to “evidence in support of [Geschwind’s] prediction that males have superior right hemispheres skills and females have superior left hemisphere skills” (*Essential Difference* 100). Leaving aside for the moment the potential inherent in such a claim for male rationalisation of sexism, misogyny, female marginalisation, and general cultural phallocentrism, such studies point to a possible biologic relationship between autism, gender, and sexuality. While the medical establishment works to identify causality, inter- and extrageneric autistic presence enables a Humanities-based exploration of the correlation.

Whether such a correlation ever gains traction in the clinical community is irrelevant for purposes of my analysis. Instead, it is the possibility of a deterministic, genetic correlation

between maleness and the autistic mind that compels both the creation and the consumption of a distinct autistic character with an equally distinct generic role. The literary and filmic autistic texts exist in the world, perform a rhetorical function, and are structured as they are for a reason. In a potentially post-phallocentric world as imagined in a posthuman ontology, a correlation between maleness and technocentrism, where technocentrism is understood to be an access point to power, opens a space for the autistic. The autistic then serves as a figure for promoting the relevance of masculinity. The visual rhetorical elements of the autistic techno-savant establish him as a reconfigured man, packaged to validate hierarchical male status and to carve out a niche for men at the top of a new, technocentric hegemonic pyramid. I submit that this rhetorical collection of generic texts serves as a means for cultural producers to re-assert maleness via the sensationalized construction of a disability around certain convenient diagnostic characteristics.

Theories of autism such as the Extreme Male Brain Theory may have been inspired by anecdotal evidence, some of it implied, some empirical, in fictional instances where autism and homosexuality or asexuality co-exist as in cases such as Sheldon Cooper who is played by gay actor Jim Parsons; Danny Pudi who is married to a woman (Bridget Showalter) but remains constantly at the center of the “Is he gay?” online gossip machine; Sherlock Holmes of television’s *Sherlock* whose co-creator Steven Moffat insists that Sherlock is neither gay nor straight; reclusive chess prodigy and self-loathing homophobe and anti-Semite Bobby Fischer (who was half Jewish and rumoured to be uninterested in sex); Daniel Tammet, a gay autistic savant and polyglot; Temple Grandin who self-identifies as asexual; gay artist Andy Warhol, a Postulated Autist, who has been speculatively diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum; and Alan Turing who is as well known for his homosexuality as he is for his autistic-like personal eccentricities and his still-influential mathematical genius. In addition, common autism traits

might impose a kind of de facto social asexuality on an individual who is neurologically limited in his ability to engage in either a homo- or heteronormative relationship as a result of diagnostic characteristics that include limited empathy, hyper- or hyposensitivity, discomfort with eye contact, stimming behaviours, vestibular issues leading to fine and gross motor coordination problems, balance issues, culturally inappropriate actions and mannerisms, occasionally poor hygiene, and difficulty identifying social and physical boundaries. There is also the fact that autism is still primarily considered a child's condition, an occurrence contributing to the dehumanization and the double infantilisation of living and represented autistics as being both disabled and asexual. It is for these reasons that romance and sex are conspicuously elided from representations of autism. This elision does not obviate the need for the autistic of TV and film to express and to experience love, however. In portrayal, allowances occur most often in the form of the homoerotic autistic-neurotypical bromance, which I will discuss fully in Chapter 4.

Creators of autistic characters with nearly universal consistency, tap into this hypothesized relationship between biochemical and sexual variances along the neurological spectrum. While a clinical correlation has not been definitively established, the potential connection between autism and asexuality and homosexuality has been adopted by purveyors of autistic characters in representation leading to culturally entrenched figures such as Spock, Abed, Sheldon Cooper, and Sherlock Holmes. In these prototypical cases, the autistic character presents as hypermasculine in every way but sexual.

In addition to the autistic character's unusual blend of hypermasculinity and asexuality, the autistic warrants further consideration as a distinct genre due to seven factors I have identified and established as unique to the created autistic character. These factors, each of which I will expound in full, are the Spock Aesthetic, the Apple Aesthetic, the Autistic Gaze, the

Autistic Expression, Autistic Agency, Autistic Affiliation, and Autistic Idiosyncrasy. Each of these factors has a basis in clinical definitions of autism, but each has been tweaked in production with an eye toward creating a figure who conforms to a cultural need for a character who better reflects 21st century notions of masculinity and who more naturally enables access to cultural conduits of power in a digital age. Combined, the seven generic factors do the work of promoting an intellect-based masculine prototype. That this prototype cherry-picks characteristics of clinically-described autism is problematic in terms of the lived experience of autism. Early portrayals of autism after *Rain Man* in 1988 served to bring autism into public consciousness. That they did so in incomplete or inaccurate ways was of minor concern; after all, the condition was entering into public discourse, which was of great relief to individuals and to families affected by autism. As portrayals gained traction in popular culture, the romanticization of the autistic figure increased at a commensurate rate along with stereotypes and misinformation. While the autistic in portrayal occupies a nebulous space between the clinical and the cultural, these seven generic requisites exist as rhetorical devices that elevate an aesthetic and a set of sensibilities reflective of and advocating for a specific, intellect-based sub-category of hegemonic masculinity.



Figure 2 - The Spock Aesthetic

1. The Spock Aesthetic

The intergeneric autistic character can trace many of his physical and personality roots back to Spock. As a foundational character, Spock is invoked frequently by living autists and within the autism community of representation. Temple Grandin reports that “When I was an awkward teenager who did not fit in with the other kids, the logical Mr. Spock was a character I could really identify with” (“The Effect Mr. Spock Had on Me”). Barbara Jacobs, a popular British advice columnist, entitled her memoir *Loving Mr. Spock* to reflect her infuriating on-again, off-again attempt at romance with a mercurial man she identified as being on the autism spectrum. Nathaniel Clark, the protagonist in Jennifer Roy’s YA novel *Mindblind*, describes himself as “eccentric, quirky, loner, nerd, genius, geek, Spocklike, weird” (21). In Ashley

Edward Miller and Zack Stentz's YA novel *Colin Fischer*, Colin's room is described as covered with "photos of Star Trek's Mr. Spock, Commander Data, even Detective Grissom from CSI" as what Colin's father discovers is "a shrine not to actors [Colin] admired, but to cool, clear-headed logic" (9). In the *Community* episode "Critical Film Theory," Abed describes himself to Jeff: "Everyone else is growing and changing all the time, and that's not really my jam. I'm more of a fast-blinking, stoic, removed, uncomfortably self-aware type. Like Data or Johnny-5 or Mork or Hal...Of course, Spock probably goes without saying." In *The Big Bang Theory* episode "The Spock Resonance," Sheldon Cooper, upon meeting Leonard Nimoy's son, gushes, "I admire your father's work very much. It's not every day I get to meet someone whose life's journey began in my hero's scrotum." Spock, in fact, is a frequent point of reference for Sheldon and appears or is alluded to in multiple episodes of the show including "The Transporter Malfunction," "The Thespian Catalyst," "The Codpiece Trilogy," and "The Lizard-Spock Expansion."

Such common references stand to reason as "Spock could be an all-too-rare positive role model for those with autism spectrum conditions, promoting, as he does, the value of 'autistic' attributes and reframing negative stereotypes of autism in a more positive light" (Lawrence-Smith 251). Rachel Groner, whose chapter title "Sex as Spock," highlights Spock as "one of the metaphors most often used by those authors to explain their autism, that of half-human and half-Vulcan" (Groner 264). Although Groner conflates Spock with androids such as Data and Seven-of-Nine from the *Star Trek* universe, for my purposes, I distinguish between such figures because Spock, like portrayed autistics and autistic techno-savants, possesses a purely organic intellect as opposed to a figure whose intellect is artificially enhanced, created, or technologically-mediated.

Consistent with this “Spock template,” characters such as Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), Fred Tate (*Little Man Tate*), Abed Nadir (*Community*), Alan Turing (*The Imitation Game*), Alton (*Midnight Special*), and Lisbeth Salander (*Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) conform to a Spock-inspired, prototypical look. Other spectrum portrayals such as Mark Zuckerberg (*The Social Network*), Adam (*Adam*), Elliot Alderson (*Mr. Robot*), and Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*), can often be found wearing a hooded sweater or cap that replicates the “Spock style” of hair cut into bangs. This imitated Spock Aesthetic makes sense from the point of view of a producer. If a producer needs an introverted, brilliant, tech-savvy, simultaneously attractive and off-putting character, he or she is likely to look, deliberately or subconsciously, to Spock, one of the most iconic pop culture figures of all time. If Alan Turing represents the cultural birth of the mythologized asexual or homosexual techno-human, then Spock, as the father of the intergeneric autistic, represents the look and model of behaviour, which ensuing generations of represented autistics and techno-savants have adopted.



Figure 3 - The Imitated Spock Aesthetic

2. The Apple Aesthetic

Transitioning from the general Spock Aesthetic to the more tangible aesthetic of the represented autistic body, I have identified and will illustrate the features, effects, and rhetorical

function of the autistic physiognomy. The emphasis on countenance and comportment serves as a generic shortcut, a means for an audience to identify the character's personality and role in the narrative. This is especially important for the autistic in portrayal since, unlike other disabilities, there is no autistic "look" per se in the real world. In keeping with the technocentric, digital age "Apple Aesthetic," the autistic tends to be streamlined and symmetrical, and is, infamously like today's ubiquitous Apple products, sealed off, unable to be opened, accessed, or repaired. He possesses a physiognomy of perfect proportions, symmetry, clean lines, and a slim, angular body based less on the animalistic human form and more reflective of modern computers, laptops, televisions, interactive touch-screens, iPads, iPods, cell phones, and other access points to virtual information networks. Exceptions such as "Rain Man" or "Max" from *Mary and Max* notwithstanding, autistic characters tend to be portrayed as conventionally physically attractive. In the episode "The Hounds of Baskerville" on the BBC series *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes is described by John Watson as "being all mysterious with your cheekbones and turning your coat collar up so you look cool." Abed easily slips into charismatic alpha male roles such as *Mad Men*'s Don Draper and Han Solo from *Star Wars*. He is referred to by Jeff as "rakishly good-looking" and is told by Troy that he is impossible to insult because "your eyes are too gentle and mysterious." In *Adam*, Adam Raki (Hugh Dancy) is described as "the cutest guy in the office." According to the "Culture" section of the blog *Telegraph*, "[Star Trek creator] Gene Roddenberry, who was behind the cult TV show, said he deliberately gave the half-Vulcan character a 'slight look of the devil...that might be particularly provocative to women.'" Such characteristics are a far cry from the prototypical nerd of previous pop culture incarnations. Seminal depictions of "nerd characters," as in *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Weird Science* (1985), *The Breakfast Club* (1985), and *Short Circuit* (1986) represent a

generation of white male characters portrayed as intellectual but also as bullied, marginalised, unattractive, and generally pitiable before they are finally redeemed, usually by way of a successful interaction with a female. The reconfigured version of this character under the banner of the Apple Aesthetic belies this tradition. In the same way that the intellectual male of the mid 1980s paralleled the digital technology of the time, the autistic parallels the more advanced, sleek, and sanitized digital technologies of the 21st century. The new trait of attractiveness, perhaps counterintuitive given trends in disability narratives, imbues the autistic with a unique but unused agency where, as a physically qualified but neurologically flawed candidate for a heterosexual relationship, he performs an unconsummated element of the role of the leading man.

I locate the origins of the Apple Aesthetic in the clinical world of early observations of autistic individuals. Leo Kanner, who contemporaneously with Hans Asperger first identified autism as a “unique syndrome not heretofore reported” (242), noted what he referred to as “the beautiful face” of the autistic male. In his 1943 article “Autistic Disturbance of Affective Contact,” for example, he refers to Paul, one of the subjects in the autism study, as a “slender, well built, attractive child” (227). Another subject, Virginia, is described as “a tall, slender, very neatly dressed 11-year-old girl” (231). Herbert is described as possessing “a remarkably intelligent physiognomy” (232). Charles is described as “a well-developed, intelligent-looking boy” (236). In his concluding remarks for this series of observations, Kanner notes that all the autistic children he studied were

unquestionably endowed with good cognitive potentialities. They all have strikingly intelligent physiognomies. Their faces at the same time give the impression of serious-mindedness and, in the presence of others, an anxious tenseness, probably because of the

uneasy anticipation of possible interference. When alone with objects, there is often a placid smile and an expression of beatitude... (247)

Kanner further notes the general quality of his subjects' "pleasing physical symmetry." (Silberman 184/534). One mother referenced in Steve Silberman's *Neurotribes* remarks of the autistic children that "They all look perfect." In tracing the autistic look, Silberman returns to the earliest days of the formal identification of the autistic condition: "Even in their awkwardness, irritability, and intransigence, these children struck Kanner as exceptionally beautiful. He doted on their 'strikingly intelligent physiognomies' as if the face is not just a window to the soul but into the wiring of the brain itself." This characteristic of symmetry and classically-described beauty, once overlooked in early portrayals, has been taken up by pop culture producers. For the autistic, this allows a rhetorical differentiation from and an elevation over other disabled figures.

Other experts in the field have made similar observations about the autistic physiognomy. Jacqueline Seevak Sanders, long-time assistant to Bruno Bettelheim of the nefarious and discredited "refrigerator parent" theory of autism, recalls that "We believed that autistic children were usually attractive, probably above normal intelligence, and showed not even 'soft signs' of organic damage" (Silberman 205/534). Uta Frith refers to her initial fascination with autistic children who were "beautiful and yet so different. They had a 'fairy-tale' aura – as if under a spell" (Kellaway). In *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Tony Atwood, in his discussion of trends and challenges for autistics in relationships, reports that

[m]any women describe their first impression of their partner, who at this stage may not have a diagnosis, as someone who is kind, attentive and slightly immature: the highly desirable "handsome and silent stranger." Children with Asperger's syndrome are often perceived as having angelic faces, and as adults may have symmetrical facial features that

are aesthetically appealing. The person may be more handsome than previous partners and considered a “good catch” in terms of looks... (304)

Modern clinical and parental observations of autistic children often cite this angelic appearance.

In a clinical study of facial features among autistic boys, researcher Kristina Aldridge reports:

We found that essential autism in boys is associated with a distinctive facial phenotype characterized by an increased breadth of the mouth, orbits and upper face, combined with a flattened nasal bridge and reduced height of the philtrum and maxillary region. This facial phenotype is similar to the one we recognized clinically (JHM) and may be the “beautiful face” mentioned by Kanner [58]. (8)

Aldridge goes on to state that “It is clear that development of the face and brain is an interactive process, both anatomically and genetically” (10). Previous incarnations of represented disability emphasize, accidentally or inevitably, the grotesque face or the physical asymmetry of the disabled body. The autistic, as a violator of these and of other generic conventions, can no longer be contained within in the traditional disability genre. If the rhetoric of autism in popular culture is a text that can be read, the rhetoric of autism as a clinical condition is an equally “readable” text only with a slightly different syntax.

It is significant in this context that autism’s clinically-identified genetic component should be adopted as a generic one. The connection between “genetic” and “generic,” both rooted in the Latin “genus” for “family” or “birth,” goes beyond the purely etymological. Film theory scholar Leger Grindon, invoking Wittgenstein who, himself, is often speculated as having been on the autism spectrum, captures the connection between the biological and narrative elements within genre: “The family resemblance idea, originally attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein, proposes that there are a series of characteristics that define membership in a

category (such as a film genre) rather than a rigid set of essential traits. Displaying a number of the requisite qualities is enough to be identified with the family” (106). As such, the autistic shares not only a grouping by category within television, literature, and film; he has also arrived at, through a type of produced, socio-cultural selective breeding of the disabled, a distinct look and particularized personality that are common across popular culture manifestations. The adoption of such a characteristic look is, naturally, self-perpetuating. If one set of physical and personality traits serves as a packaged identifier for an autistic “type,” then that package is bound to be replicated. That replication is the motor that drives the generic engine, which, in turn, provides a link to a power-masculinity equation in the form of the autistic techno-savant.

Within that demographic, the physical body is central to the “series of characteristics that define membership in a category.” The autistic physiognomy represents a reconfiguration of the prototypical masculine physique. In the autistic, that physique now presents as an attractive but irrelevant body as a vessel for a mind that is plugged in rather than being a mesomorphic body based on being built up or puffed out. This is not to say that the latter male physiognomy does not exist nor that it is necessarily in danger of being supplanted. It is the fact of the techno-savant nature of the portrayed autistic that allows for a successful engagement with the autistic as both disabled and as super abled. For film theorist and cultural critic Vivian Sobchack, “[t]his internalization of digital technology has also led to contemporary culture’s unprecedented fascination with superheroes. In this regard, philosopher of technology Don Ihde in *Bodies in Technology*, has connected magical thinking to ‘technofantasies’ that refuse the unintended consequences and trade-offs that occur with real-world technologies” (295). The autistic, then, as technology in a body, represents the embodiment of such “technofantasies” in a way that transitions from Haraway’s concept of the cyborg as a metaphor of mechanical-human

hybridization to the autistic as a techno-human hybrid. In this case, that hybridity is based not on cogs and gears but on human neuro-synapses as the metaphoric equivalent of digital bits of information and the wireless networks they navigate. The shift from cyborg to savant is the liminal shift from the postmodern to a re-imagined, posthuman superhero. Superheroes still dominate both the popular imagination and the box office. But the physical construction of the autistic within his own genre represents a validation rather than a simple revenge of the nerds.

3. The Autistic Gaze

To continue my argument that autism is a rhetorical construct that justifies a genre, I will distinguish between the way the autistic looks, the way the autistic is seen, and the way the autistic *sees*. In addition to the basic autistic physiognomy, there tends to be a strong visual component, usually math and science related, to the autistic character. This parallels and is likely derived from the frequently-expressed desire of parents of autistic children to “peel back” the impenetrable shield surrounding the autistic child order to access his latent neurotypical “humanness.” Such visual framing serves as a reminder that the autistic is functioning, not in relational space with other human beings, but in concert with an invisible world of numerology, scientific concepts, and digital data.



Figure 4 - *The Graphic Autist*

The autistic relates to objects, digital technologies, theorems, and blueprints instead of to people. Spock as science officer has a default position, when not at the right hand of Captain Kirk, under the hood of his computer monitor. Sheldon Cooper's apartment is decorated with equations on white boards scattered throughout the living room and kitchen. Even the bathroom shower curtain is patterned with the Periodic Table of Elements. In *Community*, Abed makes and screens movies as his way of communicating with the world. Diagrams, coordinates, mental post-it notes, assorted environmental clues, and the Cicero-inspired Method of Loci, or "mental palace," pepper Sherlock Holmes' visual field in the BBC series *Sherlock*. The end credits of *Rain Man* contain photographs taken by the character Raymond throughout the movie. Temple

Grandin has written multiple books, among them, *Thinking in Pictures*, *Emergence*, and *The Way I See It*, whose titles alone gesture to this idea of a defined boundary between the autistic mind and the external sphere of sensory perception. Other literary titles such as *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Marcelo in the Real World*, and Tito Mukhopadhyay's *How Can I Talk if My Lips Don't Move: Inside My Autistic Mind*, and films such as *Touch* and the documentary *Bobby Fischer Against the World* equally reference the dynamic of the autistic as an internalised, otherworldly and witnessing mind rooted in a phenomenological body navigating a neurotypical environment.



Figure 5: *The Autistic Under Glass*

In addition to the third-person juxtaposition of the autistic with graphs, formulas, maps, and equations, the autistic techno-savant is frequently shown from a first-person perspective situated within the autistic's mind. Gary Bell from *Alphas* is shown scanning the air in front of him, a seemingly typical example of autistic stimming. However, viewers are privy to seeing what he sees within his impenetrable scopic field; that is, a network of unlimited information that he can access biologically without a computer, wi-fi, or hard-wired port of entry. In television and film, such visuals are especially striking and function on literal and metaphoric levels. Each visual contains four elements arranged in the following order: the autistic character, his text in the form of equations, a partition – either glass or else the film screen itself, and the viewer. This specific mise en scène activates several rhetorical mechanisms that function in tandem. The multi-purposed arrangement separates the autistic from the audience by way of the physical barrier. It connects the autistic to the audience by the barrier's transparency. It alienates the autistic in the double sense of the word; that is, the autistic is present but separated, and he is illustrated as writing by way of a complex math-based or schematic formula that appears to audiences as an alien language. The fact that the equations and algorithms tend to be presented backward from the audience perspective, highlights the autistic as possessing a unique techno-literacy that eludes neurotypicals. There is a distinct quality of the “almost” in this generic convention. The audience can *almost* connect to the autistic techno-savant. The audience can *almost* read his language. The autistic can *almost* communicate. The audience can *almost* understand.

Visual rhetorical mechanisms do the work of enabling, ostensibly, a view into the inscrutable autistic mind. Ian Hacking, citing Oliver Sacks' comments about Temple Grandin as an autobiographer, observes that “[Temple Grandin's book *Emergence* was] unprecedented

because there had never before been an ‘inside narrative’ of autism; unthinkable because it had been medical dogma for forty years or more that there *was* no ‘inside’, no inner life, in the autistic” (Hacking, qtd. in Oliver Sacks 199). Genre provides the access point and the means for autism to be addressed both externally and from the inside out. Seeing the world through the autistic’s eyes serves to amaze and inform the audience while it initiates a transformation from disability to super ability and “translates” the autistic experience for an audience. The act of situating the reader or viewer within the autistic mind further differentiates autism from other conditions covered in the larger disability genre. While novels such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and films like *Wait Until Dark* and *Children of a Lesser God* attempt to connect the reader or viewer viscerally with schizophrenia and with blindness and deafness respectively, most disabilities do not translate beyond surface constructions for able-bodied, neurotypical audiences. Representations of autism, however, unlike the physical disabilities of the blind, of the deaf, of amputees, and of the otherwise physically disabled or deformed, can be seen and felt as relatable socio-cultural conditions. The diagnostic “triad of impairments,” – deficits in communication, imagination, and social interaction – are easily demonstrated in literature and on screen and are further illustrated in the autistic techno-savant through an interior, techno-graphic point of view. Although fascinated by the disabled, no one wants to *be* disabled. Now, however, disability in the form of the autistic, is portrayed as something to be coveted as a techno-biological connection that may be within reach.

4. *The Autistic Expression*

With delayed or deficient language acquisition is one of autism's triad of impairments, I will now move from the autistic body to the autistic as a communicating being. In addition to his physiognomy, personality, and perspective, the autistic in portrayal tends to be possessed of awkward speech patterns and is often called out by those around him for sounding like a computer. In "Applied Anthropology and Culinary Arts," Abed, assisting in the delivery of Shirley's baby, asks her to "... pretend I'm saying this in a soothing, reassuring, non-robotic voice: We're not gonna make it to the hospital." In the *Big Bang Theory* episode "The Monster Isolation," Sheldon reports that "People in the comments section [of 'Fun with Flags'] have said that my delivery is robotic. Perhaps that isn't the compliment it sounds like." In *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman plays Raymond with the extremes of a mumbling monotone or panicked shrieking. Spock's speech pattern is famously even-keel and unemotional. Nathaniel Clark in Jennifer Roy's *Mindblind* admits to his "superior-to-you tone of voice that gets me in a lot of trouble" (172) and narrates the novel in epistolary form with his journal entries speckled with the language of computers as in "Open File: C:\MyFiles\genius\first_time.avi(Date 1/14/99)" (5). In her memoir about her relationship with Danny, an undiagnosed Aspie, author Barbara Jacobs sites "the strange sounds he made" and the "flat, pragmatic way he spoke" (9). Lou Arrendale in Elizabeth Moon's speculative science fiction novel *Speed of Dark* asks, "Do I sound like a textbook when I talk? Is that what Dr. Fornum means by 'stilted language?'" (241/370). Such examples, relentlessly occurring, serve the triple purpose of cementing certain elemental aspects of a new generic character, corroborating an supposedly masculine innate tendency to systemize rather than empathize, and justifying a trend that aligns male mental processing with the processing power of the digital era.

The autistic as mimic functions as part of the rhetorical framework that structures the genre. Clinically, the portrayed autistic reflects the diagnostic tendency for echolalia, or repetitive speech patterns, among living autists. Presented as incapable of speaking for himself, the portrayed autistic frequently relies on quoting others as in *The Rosie Project* where Don, attempting to court Rosie, “had sourced my speech from *When Harry Met Sally*” (Simsion 3480/3872). In “The Date Night Variable,” Sheldon Cooper, pressured by Amy (Mayim Bialik) into being more romantic, quotes a long passage from *Spider-Man* (2002). In *Community*, Abed consistently relies on television and movie quotes and tropes as a means to communicate with the neurotypicals in the study group. As if to off-set his savant skills, prodigious memory, and potential as a new masculine prototype, the autistic is portrayed by neurotypicals as needing to rely on neurotypical pop culture references to communicate effectively. These are neither accidental occurrences nor are they simply symbols to be dismissed as shorthand markers of a generic character. Instead, these references validate both popular culture tropes and men’s immersion in them. Doing so enables nerds to identify as a new breed of masculine. In rhetorical terms, this reliance by autistics on neurotypical texts functions to bridge a divide between the language of the neurotypical and the language of the autistic. It is not a shared, language, however. Instead it serves to cement neurotypical language as the base by which all other forms of communication are measured. There are multiple forces at work here: the language of the autistic is marginalised as robotic, the language of the neurotypical is elevated as prototypical, and the bridge allows for traffic to move in one direction only: toward the neurotypical way of communicating and, by extension, of being. In this sense, the language of the portrayed autistic serves as a marker of intellectual superiority, as a tool for further cultural marginalisation, and as a rhetorical conflation of masculinity and techno-communication.

This conflation of language and symbol-use with human ontology is troubling. Because autism is determined in part by a deficit in language and symbol-use, such a conflation represents an existential threat to living autistic people as human beings. The autistic, as an individual, whether living or as portrayed, embodies a neurology that limits or compromises rhetorical constructions such as metaphor, semiotics, irony, sarcasm, figures of speech, and general language-acquisition, expression, and reception. The autistic remains human, however, but such restrictive definitions situate him as alien or as otherwise non-human in portrayal. This is especially problematic in the oft-breached space between represented autism and autism as a lived condition where the very humanness of people with autism is potentially compromised.

Like other characteristics and mannerisms present in the autism across genres, the use of language has been adopted from clinical definitions, sometimes with dubious accuracy, for the purposes of creating an identifiable character who fascinates in the same proportion that he confounds. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, “First symptoms of autism spectrum disorder frequently involve delayed language development” (*DSM-V* 56) with “[p]ersistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” (*DSM* 50) listed as the first of three major diagnostic imperatives.²³ Although listed as “language deficits, ranging from complete lack of speech through language delays, poor comprehension of speech, echoed speech, or stilted and overly literal language” (*DSM-V* 53), the specific type of language impairment associated with autism essentially involves a disconnect between the autistic’s age and a socially appropriate level of speech accompanied by impaired communicative reciprocity. Autistics are frequently referred to as “little professors,” a phrase often attributed without verification to Hans Asperger in his original identification of autism as a

²³ At its most basic diagnostic level, autism is considered a triad of impairments comprising significant delays or deficits in language, social behaviour, and imaginative play.

distinct neurological condition. Autistics in television, fiction, and film tend to possess the detached hyper-intellect commonly attributed to the stereotypical “absent-minded professor.” The autistic character’s language, in terms of content, diction, syntax, echolalia, and stilted cadence, tends to follow suit. If the three previous factors – the Spock Aesthetic, the Apple Aesthetic, and the Autistic Gaze – provide a blueprint for how the autistic is rhetorically constructed in visual terms, this fourth factor entrenches scientific, academic techno-speak as the communication model, via the autistic, as the domain of the modern male.

5. *Autistic Agency*

Moving from the way the portrayed autistic is built, looks, sees, and speaks, I now turn to the narrative function of the autistic characters. Autism-driven stories tend to be imbued with themes of ability-from-disability and with motifs of science, computer technology, and detective imagery. Examples of the latter include *House Rules*, *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, *Extremely Loud / Incredibly Close*, *Marcelo in the Real World*, *Sherlock*, *Colin Fischer*, and *Mercury Rising*, which all feature adolescent male autistics spearheading, assisting, or serving as the key to a mystery. Baron-Cohen reports that

some adults with AS [Asperger’s Syndrome] are fascinated by crime reports because they enjoy working out basic rules of the following kind: if the victim showed physical signs a, b and c, then the murder in all likelihood involved techniques x, y and z...Some people call this approach to the world “forensic,” beautifully epitomized by Sherlock Holmes, and they extend this approach to understanding social situations. (*Essential Differences* 148)

Characters such as the ones featured in these works are often out to solve a puzzle, one that will help them to gain insight into the workings of the neurotypical world, into a mystery, or into the subtle intricacies of human social and/or romantic interaction. I find this pattern cleverly epitomised in a *Community* meta-commentary when Abed, channeling Carrie Wells (Poppy Montgomery) from *Unforgettable*, a detective show centering on a hyperthymesiac²⁴ savant, investigates a crime scene: “I see a man... using a social disorder as a procedural device. Wait, wait, wait, I see another man. Mildly autistic super-detectives everywhere...basic cable, broadcast networks...pain, painful writing. It hurts” (5:2 “Basic Intergluteal Numismatics”). Characters defined by their savant skills in math, science, and memory include Spock, Sheldon Cooper, John Nash, Fred Tate, Elliot Alderson, Gary Bell, Simon Lynch, Raymond Babbitt, Lou Arrendale, Christopher Boone, Don Tillman, Colin Fischer, and Alton Meyer among many others. The autistic as the embodiment of math, science, and digital technology, as concepts and as functional tools in the world, builds upon and further promotes the common perception of the autistic as detached from humanity and plugged into an altered, cryptic state of techno-consciousness that the neurotypical both dreads and desires.

Related to the detective trope and in terms of narrative structure, there tends to be a challenge, a mystery that only the unappreciated, ostracized, and isolated autistic techno-savant can ultimately solve. A problem is, therefore, often contrived around the autistic’s unique skill set. The autistic involves the neurotypical in a dynamic of unapproachability, intrigue, complication, irritation, and usefulness. In the end, he ultimately makes a breakthrough, exhibiting some glimmer of hope that “proves” that there is a neurotypical human embedded

²⁴ “hyperthymesia” is a condition characterised by an individual’s extreme autobiographical memory. Actor Marilu Henner, who was featured on an episode of 60 minutes where she claimed to have a near perfect recollection of every day of her life since adolescence, is often cited as an example.

tragically and heroically inside of the closed off, alien, and alienating autistic mind. The breakthrough redeems the autistic from disabled to potentially normative and redeems the neurotypical from prejudiced to righteous.²⁵ In *Rain Man*, Raymond's prodigious memory makes him useful to his brother to recoup his lost investments by scoring big at the blackjack table. In *Mercury Rising*, autistic nine-year-old Simon Lynch holds the key to the NSA's secret spy codes. Spock is called upon constantly to repair and to communicate telepathically with a variety of sentient computers and assorted alien beings throughout the galaxy. Christopher Boone's mathematical mind enables him to solve the mystery of the curious incident of the dog in the night-time. Jacob Hunt in *House Rules* uses his rigid dedication to systemising in order to exonerate himself of a murder charge and to help bring the actual killer to justice. For the neurotypical consumer of autism as genre, the implied contract is, "he can do what I can't; therefore, I don't need to feel sorry for him."

I find this compelling as it represents a departure from other tropes within the disability genre and positions the autistic as just this side of traditionally superheroic. Disability in other generic contexts is compensated for by super powers. Daredevil is blind but his other senses are radically heightened. Professor Xavier of the X-Men is confined to a wheelchair but is the world's most powerful telepath. Donald Blake needs a cane to walk, but he transforms into Thor. Puck, of the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight, is a dwarf but is gifted with incredible dexterity and fighting skills. The autistic is neither physically disabled nor reliant on prostheses to function. He does not transform; in fact, his static nature is among his defining characteristics. He exists between disabled and superabled in a rhetorical space all his own.

²⁵ This dynamic is illustrated as well with near step-by-step rhetorical perfection in the new ABC hospital drama *The Good Doctor* (2017).

6. Autistic Affiliation

Relationships, especially romantic and sexual ones, between autistics and between autistics and neurotypicals are problematic in portrayal. This is almost certainly a contrivance based on a clinical perception of autistics as lacking empathy combined with a culturally-inscribed Western tendency to fathom romance as heteronormative and as the restricted domain of the able-bodied and neurotypical. The autistic is rarely coupled in a heteronormative relationship, although exceptions exist such as in the novel *The Rosie Project*, its sequel *The Rosie Effect*, and in the movie *Adam*, although in the latter, the autism-neurotypical gulf proves insurmountable, and the relationship dissolves with Beth (Rose Byrne) screaming at Adam (Hugh Dancy), “You’re a child, Adam! Fuck Asperger’s. You’re a fucking child!” Typically, this narrative points to Adam’s eccentricity and incorrigibility as the “problem” that must be overcome or else surrendered to by the neurotypical population. Rarely is neurotypical behaviour itself indicted as tunnel-visioned, ignorant, uncreative, or otherwise problematic. Although the intergeneric autistic and the neurotypical may reach some sort of understanding, breakthrough, or symbolic reconciliation, they rarely remain together, and they almost never marry or engage in sexual relations, rare exceptions such as Donald (Josh Hartnett) and Isabelle (Radha Mitchell) from *Mozart and the Whale* notwithstanding.

Judeo-Christian puritanical prohibitions against miscegenation combined with the socially-reinforced Western visceral reaction against physical asymmetry, disability, deformity, and general abnormality have restricted the portrayal of sex and romance throughout the disability genre: for example, the Beast must become a stereotypically handsome and able-bodied white prince before he can enter a final partnership with Beauty. Cyrano, deformed and

battle-scarred, dies in the same moment that he confesses his love for Roxane. Esmerelda and the hunch-backed Quasimodo are united only in death. The societal pariah Shrek and the fairy-tale princess Fiona function as a couple only if both are human or if both are ogre. The same restrictions apply to the autism spectrum where autistic characters are enjoined from experiencing romantic attraction or sexual love with a neurotypical partner.²⁶ And yet the fascination with miscegenation (be it interracial, interspecies, abled-disabled, or techno-human) remains a source of irresistible fascination for the neurotypical viewer who, beleaguered by relentless societal conditioning, imagines himself as the template for all of humanity with others, in this case the autistic, being a quasi-human variant on the theme. Such an imprinted and deeply embedded binarism represents a problem that is addressed through the satisfying resolution of myth. Leslie Fielder calls it “the fantasy of making it with a cripple: a variant of the Beauty and the Beast archetype, bred of the erotic horror-fascination (can they do it? how do they do it? how would it feel?) that drastically disabled males seem to stir in ‘normal’ women” (*Tyranny* 38). Within generic representations of the autistic, the coupling tends to remain either unaddressed or unconsummated, although the sub-text of prurient interest and the morbid fascination remain. Portrayed nearly universally as asexual, the autistic is essentially a castrated male, a phenomenon that I will address in detail in Chapter 5 when I engage more fully with the issue of sex on the spectrum. As the embodiment of the most foundational elements of modern digital technology, the autistic is precluded from experiencing romantic or sexual love as such a foray would blur neurotypical man’s self-preservative line between himself and machine. After all, if the autistic, in addition to his superhuman computational abilities and moral stoicism, could also serve as a viable sexual partner, where then does that leave the neurotypical alpha male who suddenly

²⁶ To illustrate the point, while Adam and Beth’s relationship proves unsustainable, *Mozart and the Whale* centers on an ultimately successful romantic relationship between a man and a woman who are both on the autism spectrum.

offers nothing except for his now antiquated bravado, barbaric violence, impeached heteronormativity, and redundant sexuality? The outlet that vitiates this injunction against love on the spectrum, as I shall discuss in detail in Chapter 4, is the neurotypical-autistic bromance.

There is a culturally self-preservative function at work in portrayals of autistics and romance. In general, and leaving aside the bromance for a moment, the autistic adult possesses an at-best clumsy concept of romance. Autistic characters tend to be virginal, asexual, or effeminate.²⁷ As with the reliance on pre-packaged neurotypical language, the neurotypical producer and consumer are compelled to imbue the intergeneric autistic with an exaggerated although not wholly fabricated sense of aloneness. This, I argue, exposes an exclusionary dynamic that promotes heteronormative sex and romance as foundational in a definition of what it means to be human. As dozens of examples illustrate, the autistic is portrayed as outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. The autistic, therefore, is rhetorically prevented from being expressed as fully human. The denial of sexuality, romance, emotion, and language function by way of identification to reinforce a dualism between the neurotypical as baseline normative and the autistic as something other and non-normative. The autistic does not conform completely to the archetypal Other. The autistic is not the stereotyped “outsider-looking-in.” He is portrayed as

²⁷ Sheldon Cooper has been identified by the show’s creators as being neither male nor female but “other.” As a Vulcan, Spock is celibate and exists in constant resistance against the biological urge to return home to mate every seven years as governed by Pon-Farr, the Vulcan bio-matrimonial imperative. Abed engages in a brief relationship with Rachel (Brie Larson) but remains irretrievably ensconced in a bromantic relationship with Troy for most of the series. Sherlock is eternally wedded to John Watson. Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch) as portrayed in the *Imitation Game* proposes to Joan Clarke (Keira Knightly) as a beard to conceal his homosexuality for which he is, in the film as in real life, ultimately arrested and chemically castrated. Linda Freeman (Sigourney Weaver) in *Snow Cake* lives alone after her daughter, the result of a rape during Linda’s institutionalization, is killed in a car accident. Alex (Alan Rickman), who under normal circumstances would be Linda’s suitor, instead engages in a sexual tryst with Linda’s neighbour Maggie (Carrie Ann Moss). Mark Zuckerberg, as portrayed in *The Social Network*, is shown in the first minutes of the film creating the foundations for Facebook™ after being summarily dismissed by his girlfriend Erica (Rooney Mara) who tells him, “You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you’re going to go through life thinking that girls don’t like you because you’re a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won’t be true. It’ll be because you’re an asshole,” after which Mark spends the rest of the movie prophetically expanding his techno-social empire in friendless, celibate isolation.

an outsider, of course. But he is not looking in, and he has no apparent desire to engage in sexual relations nor in the ostensibly unique human interactions of love and romance. Such characteristics serve to reinforce a cultural prescription for what it means to be human. While autism narratives typically involve attempts to bridge the neurotypical-autism gap, they simultaneously situate the autistic as lacking a key component of what it means to be human. This dynamic represents the second of two rhetorical forces at work in the same space: in the first, the expectations of producers and consumers feed each other; in the second, the autism narratives attempt to bridge a gap while constructing a rhetorical roadblock.

7. Autistic Idiosyncrasy

In addition to the elements of aesthetics and physiognomy, visual perspective, language, narrative function, and social interrelationality that I have discussed above, dozens of other eccentric and idiosyncratic characteristics position the autistic as a cultural outsider, someone removed from, immune to, and possibly evolved beyond the human condition. An analysis of the texts I have identified reveals an extensive and consistent theme across genres: The autistic is ostracized by neurotypicals. He is pure of heart and possessed of noble intentions. He is obsessive, compulsive (but never impulsive), and usually possessed of an eidetic memory. He is socially and sexually naïve, devoted to logic, reliant upon technology, and is characterized by limited empathy with no real understanding of neurotypical subtleties of communication such as sarcasm, metaphor, facial expressions, or figures of speech. He tends to lack a sense of humour and has an elevated sense of morality for himself (monastically virtuous, he abstains from guile, dishonesty, violence, profanity, drugs, and alcohol) as well as an elevated tendency to apply his

morality to others, which is to say that he is both law-abiding and law-enforcing, thus perpetuating an essential feature of a conventional masculine stereotype. Despite his social deficits, he proves himself to be excellent resource in a particular area. The autistic tends to bring his obsessive interest to bear as the only means of solving the larger narrative conflict at hand. What this indicates, beyond the scope of the fictional context, is a common occurrence in disability literature and film where the disabled character must possess some compensatory redemptive quality unknown and inaccessible to the able-bodied neurotypical.

Easily-recognizable, unconventional mannerisms and personality quirks serve as a rhetorical sign-post. These indicators include but are not limited to stimming behaviours, touch-aversion, lack of eye contact, and hypersensitivity to external stimuli, all traits that are received by fellow characters and likely by audiences as occupying a space between charming eccentricity and annoying, atypical, and possibly subversive behaviour. Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock, among dozens of other examples of the autistic techno-savant, are portrayed as physically attractive, yet emotionally closed off, socially awkward, and bodily rigid. It should come as no surprise that these distinguishing characteristics made their way from the clinical lab onto the big screen and into the pages of modern fiction. It is the alien nature of the condition that appeals on a pop cultural level. Autism-related genres are imbued with images of the autistic as an alien or as a techno-human hybrid. The trope has become as common as it is unwavering.

I have now defined the intergeneric autistic in part by a scaffolding comprising the Spock Aesthetic, the Apple Aesthetic, the Autistic Gaze, the Autistic Expression, Autistic Agency, Autistic Affiliation, and Autistic Idiosyncrasy. But collectively, what do these seven supporting mechanisms mean? Why are they important? Like all generic imperatives, those associated with the autistic tend to be selected with a deliberate eye toward what from the real world might most

appeal in the created world of fantasy. Autism across genres is a vehicle for the reader or viewer to engage with his or her own authentic humanity in juxtaposition with the perceived virtual humanity of the autistic. Washington Post blogger Alyssa Rosenberg sums up this notion when she refers to "...autism as a moral barometer for neurotypical people." Western subjectivity has historically been identified with a Self-Other schism. Although fulfilling most of the historical criteria as an ostracized Other, the autistic differs in that, as a so-called barometer, he remains relatively unreadable. This makes the autistic even more intriguing in rhetorical terms as Western narratives tend to be driven by complications in relationships with narrative tension deriving from the uncertainty about the method or even the possibility of a resolution. The seven factors I have identified and explicated above function to make the autistic understandable, useful, admirable, and even enviable. They also serve the ancillary purpose of absolving neurotypical confusion and guilt over the marginalisation of these and of other non-normative figures.

Naturally, the identification of a generic function of autism must rely on more than the simple fact of a litany of commonalities and identifying characteristics. Genre must also embody a sense of social relevance. The genre must capture the popular imagination and must offer what is not offered anywhere else. As what is fundamentally a disabled superhero, the autistic techno-savant possesses a unique agency. To further arrive at a justification for a definable body of intergeneric autism, I need to respond to two essential questions: 1) Why is this group of films necessary? and 2) What is lost culturally, artistically, and rhetorically if this group of films were to cease to exist or if it never existed at all?

In media, television, film, and literary portrayal, autism started out first as a clinical enigma to be examined for the social purpose of determining inclusion into or exclusion from the able-bodied, neurotypical world. Characters such as Rain Man, based largely on the autistic

savant Kim Peek, and living autistics and autistic savants such as Temple Grandin, Donna Williams, and Stephen Wiltshire brought the idea of the autistic into the modern mainstream and positioned autism as a condition to be marveled at and often romanticized as indicative of latent superheroic abilities that perhaps all people possess at some as yet undiscovered neurological level. As the condition became more pervasive in popular imagination, creators of fictional texts and popular culture in a variety of forms latched onto autism first for its potential as a convenient means of arrogating an enigmatic disability as a marketable commodity and second as a perhaps unconscious attachment to a male figure who represents a crisis of masculinity in a digital era where traditional and uniform notions of embodiment, gender, sexuality, and neurology are being called increasingly into question. Today, autism as genre serves multiple, occasionally paradoxical and at times seemingly contradictory functions. Portrayals of autism serve as a rhetorical text embedded with specific features that, irrespective of intent, have inevitable effects as they enter popular consciousness. I have identified eight such effects – normalization, validation, accessibility, homoerotic partnering, embodied technology, heteronormative legitimization, anti-capitalism, and the introduction of a posthuman superhero – which I delineate here:

First, popular portrayals tend to normalize the condition, assigning it a restricted set of characteristics for easy identification. In portrayal, autism can be understood beyond “Rain Man” as a spectrum condition rather than simply as a demonstration of superhuman memorization skills coupled with radically impaired social skills.

Second, autism is validated by occupying a generic home while nerd culture is reciprocally validated as geek chic. Autism has been popularly referred to as “Geek Syndrome” (Baron-Cohen, *Essential Difference* 164) with characteristics of the conditions regularly

celebrated throughout popular culture. This validation helps to cement autism in popular consciousness, which can have positive spill-over effects when it comes to clinical research, funding, pedagogy, and other physio, family, and occupational support services. The exploitative effects are complicated by the fact of the mythologization of autism and mitigated in part because it is difficult to marginalize a figure who is already self-marginalized and apparently immune from the need for emotional connectedness or social inclusion.

Third, within its generic home, autism becomes accessible to mass audiences. Especially important considering autism's enigmatic nature, a generic home provides a safe space for a neurotypical audience to arrive at a sense of comfort and familiarity with the condition. Essential to this accessibility is the elision of the quality of the freak that characterized the autistic's predecessors in the traditional disability genre. The autistic is glorified rather than pitied and attracts rather than repulses.

Fourth, the autistic techno-savant in television and film provides a contemporary bromantic partner to couple in a homoerotic relationship with a neurotypical alpha male. Archetypal pairings of this nature have morphed from exemplars such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu to Huck and Jim to Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook to Ishmael and Queequeg to cyborgs to black and white buddy cop movies and now to the neurotypical and autistic techno-savant pairings where, in each case, the "Other" (I call the autistic incarnation of Rousseau's "Noble Savage" a "Noble Savant") provides what the neurotypical lacks, fears, and covets.

Fifth, across genre, the autistic provides access, in metaphorized terms, to computer technology and to mass digital information systems. Ironically but perhaps not unexpectedly, autism in portrayal both humanizes the autistic as an intriguing character – often the protagonist, side-kick, or key to the narrative and almost never the villain – and also mechanizes him as a

human-computer hybrid possessed of a prodigious memory but apparently incapable of emotion. With a zeitgeist trending toward an anticipated techno-human singularity, the autistic represents a hybridized being, a cyborg of sorts without the prostheses. Woven into the fabric of this hybridization is the reconfiguration of a common idea of masculinity as unified around a traditional body-power equation.

Sixth, autism as genre enables the neurotypical consumer to analyze and to appreciate his own role as an empathetic partner in a now reinforced and re-legitimized heteronormative relationship. That is, this unique incarnation of disability genre, with autistic characters who are constructed as hyper-logical, rigidly obsessed with routine, and lacking empathy, highlights, by exclusion, the exact stereotypical masculine characteristics that a neurotypical woman might see as problematic in establishing, developing, and sustaining a long-term romantic relationship. The autistic, therefore, reinforces hegemonic models of heteronormativity.

Seventh, more cynically, the extrageneric qualities of the autistic make the autistic potentially useful. As Jay Dolmage observes, "...people with disabilities can be seen as undesirable if they are not 'productive' in the global market, or physical disability can be seen as a biogenetic commodity" (96). In this case, the autistic functions in the latter capacity as a techno-being with biologic connectedness to a networked digital world. Like the schizophrenic to whom the autistic was originally likened, the autistic represents a threat to capitalism and to its consequent imperial enterprises and social inequities. The autistic does not buy, produce, or distribute anything. He can neither be bought nor sold. He is metaphorized as perhaps having not broken down as much as he has broken *through*. He is apolitical and, as I will continue to discuss below, both complicates and transcends performative gendered identity. However, unlike the schizophrenic, who is useful only as metaphor, the autistic, especially the autistic techno-savant,

attaches that metaphor to the real world of digital technology and the big data network of a technocentric era.

Eighth and finally, as a posthuman superheroic character, the autistic challenges long-held notions of human nature and allows for a superhuman prototype with enhanced intellectual and sensory capacity, biological access by way of an eidetic memory to massive volumes of information (the postmodern currency of power), and immunity from performative, culturally-imposed racial and gender binaries.

These eight rhetorical purposes do the work of harnessing the autism enigma without resolving it. They further serve to justify the genre and act as a bridge between neurotypical notions of humanness and the stubborn reality of the autistic as a confounding clinical and cultural artifact. This idea of an attempt to bridge the neurotypical-autism gap appears in many movies and television shows featuring autistics and autistic techno-savants. In these cases, it is the juxtaposition of the neurotypical and the autistic that seems designed to inspire questions about the nature of human behavior. Stuart Murray observes that

the films focus on ideas of ontological difference that frequently place the autistic individual in relation to a depiction of supposedly typical neurological behavior, and then mediate an idea of the human by a refractive comparison between the two. Often this takes the form of what we might call the “sentimental savant,” stressing the supposed savant abilities of the autistic, especially in terms of creativity and understanding, which are seen to inform and enrich the neurotypical world. (“Hollywood and Fascination”)

Through this “refractive comparison,” the “other” is romanticized and brought into the neurotypical fold where his abilities can be simplified into a party trick before the neurotypicals finally attain some profound insight into the nature of their own inner selves. Like other

rhetorical constructs, the autistic is a tool. In this case, he is used by producers and consumers alike as a measure of neuro-normativity and to identify the boundaries for what constitutes the human.

The measure of any genre needs to include an analysis of what that genre has contributed as well as what the absence of that genre means in artistic, cultural, and visual rhetorical terms. Generic studies necessarily revolve around the exploration and interrogation of a genre. Essential questions in genre and media studies might include, “What work does this genre do?” “How is this genre unique?” and “What are the characteristics of this genre?” For my purposes, I ask the additional question, “What might autism become without a generic home?” In this case, if intergeneric representation is lost, autism is consigned to the fringe, like schizophrenia before it, as an unredeemable condition with the autistic as a figure to be misunderstood, feared, pitied, marginalized, institutionalized, misappropriated, or ignored. Control over the pedagogical elements of autism in portrayal would be lost. Instead of Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock, the culture industry would be peopled with characters like the terrified and occasionally terrifying “Rain Man” or like “Lucy,” the merciless techno-warrior female super-savant evolved beyond human emotion and sensibility. Without autism in the mainstream, a fear-evoking sensationalism would continue to build up around the autistic with inevitable consequences for those living with autism. In the aggregate, so the thinking seems to go, better to have autism misrepresented in the autistic’s favour than fictionalised beyond recognition or redemption. This is a vital function of intergeneric autism and is perhaps its most elemental component.

Temple Grandin, in *The Way I See It*, offers a succinct version of the question of generic relevance: “What would happen if the autism gene was eliminated from the gene pool? You

would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done.”

PEDAGOGY OF GENERIC AUTISM – THEORY AND PRAXIS

With its authority derived from a legitimacy sprung from its ability to replicate itself, genre serves as both a theoretical construct and as a pedagogical tool. According to Charles Bazerman, “[g]enres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact” (19). Scholars throughout the fields of genre theory and of disability studies attest to this potential within genre to inform and instruct even as the potential exists in equal measure to distort and misrepresent.

Victoria McGeer develops this idea further: “There are two ways in which autistic self-narratives could have an impact on how autism is conceptualized and on how it is experienced” – i.e.: informative and transformative” (520). It is the “informative” side of this I wish to discuss first in considering the idea of genre as pedagogical. In visual rhetorical portrayals, “...these self-narrations not only tell the nonautistic how autistic people experience their lives and the world around them but also help to create a framework, or ‘form of life,’ in terms of which their individual lives will be experienced...” (521) McGeer’s notion of a potentially flexible generic framework is reflected as well in Altman who challenges the Aristotelian concept of genre as comprising stable essences.

In keeping with Rick Altman's semantic / syntactic approach, autism across genre contains the material iconography (the autistic look and stereotyped characteristics) and the functional structure (the autistic as detective or techno-savant) to establish intergeneric autism as a means for understanding autism in terms of its clinical imperatives as well as its social implications as a reconfigured type of 21st century masculinity. Significantly, in 1999, Altman revised his original thesis to include "pragmatics," a key addition that liberates a space for audiences to navigate between clinical and fictionalized versions of autism. With its ritualistic formulae, its ideology of disability as advantage, and its functionality as entertainment and as an instructional means of introduction to autism, generic representations of autism now incorporate the necessary building blocks for analysis within genre theory. Altman cites two generic imperatives of "topic" and "structure" (23) to which I add a "common purpose" as essential elements in defining generic convention. This common purpose goes beyond the use of a filmic body as customized entertainment for a specific demographic of movie-goers and instead, or, more accurately, in addition to, might by design be cautionary, political, exhortative, moralising, indoctrinating, and, as in the case of the intergeneric autistic, pedagogical.

Due to autism's enigmatic origins, nature, and etiology, intergeneric autism almost always contains an expository element to provide the uninformed access to and understanding of the condition. At this point, I find it helpful to provide some examples from popular television, film, and literature illustrate the point. In each case, the narrative is interrupted to allow for audiences to be introduced to the condition:

In *Rain Man*, Charlie is portrayed as the frustrated child, forced by his own greed and later by his anxiety over his autistic brother's behaviour, in search of answers:

CHARLIE: He's not crazy, he's not retarded but he's here.

DR. BRUNER: He's an autistic savant. People like him used to be called idiot savants.

There's certain deficiencies, certain abilities that impairs him.

CHARLIE: So he's retarded.

DR. BRUNER: Autistic. There's certain routines, rituals that he follows.

CHARLIE: Rituals, I like that.

DR. BRUNER: The way he eats, sleeps, walks, talks, uses the bathroom. It's all he has to protect himself. Any break from this routine leaves him terrified.

In *Mercury Rising*, two characters engage in expository banter that functions to illustrate an “acceptable” level of ignorance about autism. In keeping with the pattern, one character is ignorant; the other has answers:

NICK: So, our two billion-dollar code is an open book to people of diminished capacity?

DEAN: Autism isn't synonymous with diminished capacity. Autistic people are...they're shut off. But it's not unusual for an autistic person to be a savant.

In *Alphas*, Gary Bell, the autistic techno-savant, speaks for himself:

AGENT LOU PERSKY: Who's this kid?

GARY BELL: I'm Bill's partner. Gary Bell. I'm, I'm a computer genius. No. I'm a data analyst.

BILL HARKEN: Agent Bell is a very gifted member of my team.

GARY BELL: I'm a high-functioning autistic. Thirty-two on the CARS [Child Autism Rating] Scale.

In *Adam*, Beth searches for clues to understanding her enigmatic neighbour Adam who vacillates between charming eccentric, electronics genius, shy introvert, and petulant child:

BETH: What do you know about Asperger's syndrome?

BOSS: Oh. Well, it's a developmental disorder, kind of a high-functioning autism.

BETH: What does that mean exactly?

BOSS: Well, there's a broad range. It could be hard to tell. It could be severe social interaction problems...

BETH: Sure. So, you're saying, really, that he's not prime relationship material.

In *Mary and Max*, the autistic character once again tells his own story. Set up as a narrated letter, Max describes for Mary, a stand-in for the viewer, the specifics of his condition:

MAX: Each time I received one of your letters, I had a severe anxiety attack. This is because recently, while I was in a mental institution, they diagnosed that I have a new thing called Asperger's syndrome, which is a neurobiological, pervasive, developmental disability. I prefer "Aspie" for short. I will now list some of the traits of an Aspie.

Number one – I find the world very confusing and chaotic because my mind is very literal and logical. Number two – I have trouble understanding the expressions on people's faces. When I was younger, I made a book to help me when I was confused. I still have trouble with some people. Ivy was hard to understand because of her wrinkles and because her eyebrows weren't real. Three – I have bad handwriting, am hypersensitive...clumsy and can get very concerned. Four – I like solving problems. Ivy said this is a good thing. And finally, number five – I have trouble expressing my emotions. Dr. Bernard Hazelhof says my brain is defective but one day there will be a

cure for my disability. I do not like it when he says this. I do not feel disabled, defective or I need to be cured. I like being an Aspie. It would be like trying to change the colour of my eyes. There is one thing I wish I could change, however. I wish I could cry properly. I squeeze and squeeze, but nothing...comes out. I cry when I cut onions, but this does not count.

Nathaniel, the protagonist in *Mindblind* and in his rhetorical role as the mouthpiece for the author, engages in an expository pronouncement of the autistic condition: “People with AS have: trouble with social skills, communicative difficulties, obsessive interests and rigid thinking, sensory sensitivities, clumsy or stiff movement” (Roy 21).

Colin Fischer, as another YA autism-themed novel, operates in a similar way: “I’m diagnosed as high functioning, but I still have poor social skills and sensory integration issues that give me serious deficits in areas of physical coordination” (Miller and Stentz 40).

In her novel *House Rules*, Jodi Picoult describes autism from the point of view of a frustrated and excluded mother looking in:

In my mind, Asperger’s isn’t a label to describe the traits Jacob has, but rather the ones he lost. It was sometime around two years old when he began to drop words, to stop making eye contact, to avoid connections with people. He couldn’t hear us, or he didn’t want to. One day I looked at him, lying on the floor beside a Tonka truck. He was spinning its wheels, his face only inches away; and I thought, *Where have you gone?* (Picoult 5)

My intention is not to call out the authors in any of these cases for poor writing or for engaging in unnecessary exposition. In fact, my point is the opposite. Autism demands exposition. It is a condition whose nature complicates existing understandings of disability and necessitates new narrative structures and new languages, either hyper-literal or else metaphorized, to articulate it. In each case, autism needs to be explained in a way that most other disabilities do not. Because of the visible nature of most disabilities in portrayal and because they come pre-packaged with a history of public awareness, there is little need for expository elements in the narrative. Autism, however, must be explained in all its facets, not simply in terms of its clinical characteristics but also as it affects interpersonal relationships and family dynamics. In nearly all cases, the autistic character, within his constructed world, is sandwiched, in rhetorical terms, between an expert and an ingénue. Interestingly, the autistic, in more recent incarnations, is called upon more often to speak for himself. Rather than an object of inquiry as he has been presented in the past, the autistic functions more frequently as a mediator between the two extremes. This is especially appropriate given the autistic's roots in what used to be called the "idiot savant," a figure who continues today, in more culturally sensitive terms, to embody the banal and the brilliant, the question and the answer.

The inability of the autistic to communicate on neurotypical terms (and vice versa) necessitates a more robust explanatory series of narrative interruptions. Autism as genre provides a language for discussing autism outside the scientific community. This is the language of visual rhetoric, or what Hacking refers to in terms such as "learn," "role model," "norm," and "stabilize" that serve to "reinforce a way of talking about autism" (196-199). In both clinical and in rhetorical terms, autism might best be considered as a language barrier. Seventeen-year-old autistic entrepreneur Dani Bowman, for example, refers to "English as my second language.

Autism is my first.” Autism in rhetorical terms appears to connect the viewer to the autistic via a “translated” version of the autistic condition. But the portrayed autistic is ultimately inadequate as a potential Rosetta Stone for understanding the autistic mind. This is due in part to inaccuracies and exaggerations in production and in part to a concretised mode of viewing that continues to situate normative language, whether spoken or gestural, as the exemplar to which all other forms of communication must necessarily adhere.

Mark Haddon’s *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, both the novel and the stage adaptation, serves as an illustrative example of the way autism narratives tend to be adopted by readers and viewers as handbooks for understanding the condition: “Haddon’s tale has become a staple textbook in teacher-training courses... The well-informed model furnished by an established writer of YA fiction is transmitted to a generation of teachers and in turn their charges” (Hacking 198). This transposition from fiction to fact contains risks, especially given autism as a spectrum disorder that defies easy categorization. Although it has been thirty years since *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal is still the dominant standard-bearer for public understandings of autism, understandings which are only recently being called into question as the generic function of autism expands to reflect the spectrum nature of the condition.

As a clinical understanding of autism continues to evolve, autism in portrayal enables a commensurate public awareness of autism, which potentially points clinicians in new directions in a perpetual cycle of increasingly refined knowledge about the condition. McGeer calls attention to the fact that “the genre of autistic narrative is contributing to the ongoing social and cultural evolution of the autistic spectrum” (520). Genre has a distinct pedagogical role to play even if it does not exist solely to instruct outside of its generic conventions. It is a framework, a performative iteration, a scaffolding (to use McGeer’s term) upon which neurotypicals can hang

their psychological needs, social preconceptions, and cultural expectations. It returns to the audience almost exactly what the audience brings in. It is this symbiotic back-and-forth that gives genre in general its appeal, its creative value, and its procreative vitality. The intergeneric construction of autism serves as instructional not simply as a means of accessing and understanding autism, but, upon deeper interrogation, as a means of identifying within the neurotypical community why disability narratives compel and what they can teach about transitioning understandings of ability, subjectivity, and masculinity in a technocentric era.

Washington Post pop culture blogger Alyssa Rosenberg identifies two pillars of this pedagogical function: “Stereotypical characters with autism are a convenient and powerful device for convincing neurotypical people to mend their ways, or for demonstrating the saintliness of the people who put up with them” (“When Autism Stars”). Genre theorist Rick Carpenter addresses this intriguing phenomenon of interrelationality where works by neurotypicals about autistics contain ontological answers to unasked but essential questions about the nature of the neurotypical mind and of Western understandings of behaviour toward marginalized groups and attitudes about human variance: “I am suggesting that disability can be conceived in generic terms as an ongoing socio-cultural event, a rhetorical convention used to construct and regulate human actions and interactions.” This is an inversion of the more commonly-held and intuitive idea that human actions and interactions mold generic conventions. In the end, the pedagogical nature inherent in genre may yet yield a most vital lesson; that is, the neurotypical’s ability to learn *from* and not simply *about* the disabled, and perhaps, more vitally, the neurotypical’s ability, by way of his own portrayal and understanding of autism, to learn more about his limited, narcissistic, and often prejudiced self.

CONCLUSION

Autism as genre is more than a collection of characters, diagnosed or not, with traits of an autistic or of an autistic savant. To engage with autism on such a superficial level risks the failure to understand autism as a real and varied clinical condition and as a rhetorically constructed collection of characters whose existence points to a vital but unexplored intersection of masculinity, disability, and technology. Rick Altman proposes that

[g]enre, it would appear, is not your average descriptive term, but a complex concept with multiple meanings, which we might identify as follows: genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production; genre as *structure*, as the formal framework on which individual films are founded; genre as *label*, as the name of a category central to the discussions and communications of distributors and exhibitors; genre as *contract*, as the viewing position required by each genre film of its audience. (14, orig. emphasis)

Intergeneric autism transcends entertainment and serves multiple functions, including and even beyond what Altman suggests, in this case within both the neurotypical and autism communities. As “blueprint,” the intergeneric autistic serves as a gateway and guide in popular understanding of and discussions about autism. As “structure,” autism encapsulates certain bedrock disability tropes upon which autistic characters can be built. As “label,” autism as genre allows for quick recognition of the type of work being produced under the larger umbrella of the disability narrative. And as “contract,” the intergeneric autistic contains the implied agreement that a complex, challenging, and at times heart-breaking neurological condition will be handled

responsibly and with a liberating degree of romanticism that frees the neurotypical audience from the burden of pity or the guilt of superiority.

Autism as genre walks a tightrope between specificity and generalization. The autistic community wants audiences to be aware of autism and of its traits; however, it does not want the autistic to be defined by those traits. Autism as genre begins to reconcile this dilemma by demarcating lines between generalization and stereotyping. The autistic and the techno-savant are increasingly given a relevant role to play. Nerd Culture and a techno-centric Western society have provided the autistic the niche he needs to gain a foothold in popular imagination. The advantage is that this proliferation of roles brings light to a complex neurological issue. The danger is that it may occasionally be the wrong kind of light. The tendency to simplify and to romanticize the experience of what it means to be autistic is a cultural and clinical minefield, which generic conventions enable pop culture consumers to navigate.

It is not uncommon to hear that “genre is what we collectively believe it to be,” (Tudor 39) or that the “notion that someone utilizes a genre suggests something about audience response. It implies that any given film works in a particular way because the audience has certain expectations of the genre” (Tudor 41). Respectfully, I put this idea in reciprocal rather than in receptive terms: what an audience collectively believes, as in the case of the generic autistic presence, is informed by what that audience is shown as well as by the level of distortion in the lens through which the audience is asked to look. Within his genre, the autistic enables the able-bodied neurotypical to see himself through the other end of his own microscope. Whether that reversal of introspection yields object lessons for audiences is beyond the intention of my analysis, but, in visual rhetorical terms, the message is there even if it is not necessarily received.

In the end, genre is defined, not just by its tropes, aesthetics, and main character, but also by the recognizable supporting stock characters that populate the narratives and by the cultural purpose served by the coming together of multiple versions of creative expression under a common umbrella. I submit that the autistic techno-savant occupies a unique position in the discussion of this element of genre. He is neither an alpha male leading man, a hero who overcomes his disability, nor a disposable, ancillary figure like the town drunk of the western or the nosy neighbour of melodrama. He is beyond sidekick. He is redeemed from the contrived sympathies of a guilt-ridden consumer culture as he, as unique in character as he is in condition, performs a function that only he can.

CHAPTER 3: The Autistic Other and the Technical Death of Man

ARGUMENT – RHETORICAL FUNCTION OF THE AUTISTIC OTHER

In this chapter, I propose that the condition of autism has been appropriated by neurotypical producers of popular culture as a posthuman Other designed to entrench neurotypical heteronormative subjectivity as the template for human identity. It is in this capacity, where disability represents *the* ultimate posthuman condition (Goodley, orig. italics), that the portrayed autistic and the posthuman begin to converge. The autistic techno-savant functions in a posthuman ontology in the same way that the bestial man, ethnic minority, the disabled, and the cyborg functioned in a Humanist one: to enable the appropriation of “human” in Eurocentric, oppositional, and hierarchical terms. The autistic techno-savant is the face of the 21st century Other. Like his animalised, racialised, disabled, and mechanised predecessor Others, he is the figure who is pulled close with one hand and pushed away with the other. In this space of tension, the neurotypical experiences an affirmative sense of subjectivity coupled with the anxiety of separation.²⁸ The autistic, as a perceived closed off embodiment of hyper-narcissism, acts in rhetorical terms as a life-preserver for Humanist traditions under siege. In an era where posthumanist, anti-hierarchical notions of universal civil rights and bio-inclusivity threaten to dismantle existing cultural power structures, the represented autistic serves to further the concept of cultural Othering. The figure of the Other has long been used to affirm normative identity by way of contrast. That Othered figure has morphed over time depending on what is perceived as missing from the normative Self. As I will illustrate in this chapter, the clinical characteristics of

²⁸ I will return to this push-pull dynamic in greater detail in the next chapter via a discussion of the neurotypical-autistic bromance

autism, coupled with the romanticized notion of the autistic techno-savant, have been assembled to produce a new Other for a technocentric era. The identification of this figure is a first step in identifying that missing element of normative subjectivity and of pinpointing anxieties at work in the cultural construction of neurotypical heteronormativity.

In support of this argument, I will make the case for the autistic techno-savant as an incipient, posthuman Other and propose that this posthuman Other, in paradoxical and occasionally fluctuating ways, better represents the ideals of posthumanism than does the majoritarian male who stands to lose the most by perceived assaults on Humanist traditions. I will further demonstrate that the autistic Other poses a distinct threat to heteronormative, hegemonic notions of masculinity and represents what the neurotypical, heteronormative white male, in a posthuman landscape, first fears and then, without contradiction, hopes he will become. In a moment of epistemic transition from Humanist to Posthumanist sensibilities, from mechanical to digital representations of power, from phallocentric to egalitarian constructions of cultural and gender identity, and in conversations questioning the definition and direction of the human within the looming shadow of manmade environmental and political global crises, the autistic, as an extant Other, manifests in popular culture at a time unlikely to have happened by chance and within a cultural context too relevant to remain unexamined. The autistic techno-savant, an extremely rare phenomenon in life but prolific in TV and film, has been arrogated by producers of popular culture, filtered, recalibrated, and presented for specific purposes of cultural consumption. The autistic techno-savant is a reconstituted Other who resembles a posthuman but who has been hijacked as a means to preserve the hegemonic masculinity and ethnic whiteness of the Humanist tradition.

In portrayal, the autistic techno-savant, a male character possessed of traits of autism and extreme technocentrism, is now poised to represent a reconfigured Other, an indispensable figure in past efforts to define the human and a figure largely missing from today's posthumanism conversation. The autistic in portrayal is the key to understanding posthumanism, not as "zoe-centered egalitarianism" as Rosi Braidotti suggests, but as a veiled threat to masculine hegemony with the autistic positioned as a potential response to and defence against that threat. In portrayal, the autistic techno-savant, represented by living, historical, fictional, fictionalized, and hypermasculinized yet asexual characters such as Rain Man, Spock, Alan Turing, Sherlock Holmes, Abed Nadir, Gary Bell, and Sheldon Cooper, represents the next step in a trajectory of primarily white heteronormative men identifying their subjectivity in opposition first to animals, then to racial and ethnic minorities, then to the disabled, then to machines, and now to digital technology. Posthuman rhetoric tends to imagine a unification of these elements and a reconciliation of subject-object dualisms. More likely, however, the posthuman neurotypical man will cling to his traditional constructions of masculinity as he seeks to install a new Other, in this case, the portrayed autistic, as his vehicle to continued hegemony. There is nothing accidental about the depiction of the autistic in popular culture: In physiognomy and function, he is the reflection of a male fear of obsolescence in an increasingly post-phallocentric world. Addressing a gap in clinical understandings of autism and elaborating upon the scholarship of Stuart Murray, Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti, I will demonstrate that the autistic Other in popular portrayal represents a radical reconstruction of male subjectivity and necessitates a re-imagining of posthumanism.

To make this case, I undertake a three-part process. First, I establish the definition, history, and cultural function of the literary and historical Other leading up to the autistic techno-

savant. I then trace the trajectory of the constructed Other through its animal, racial, disabled, and mechanized manifestations to its contemporary expression in the form of the represented autistic. Finally, I posit the autistic techno-savant as a marginalized-apotheosized Other in a posthuman landscape and as a rhetorical saviour of the language and power structures most related to ethnic whiteness. As both a real and represented neurological condition, autism as a contemporary cultural artifact cannot be fully understood without engaging with posthumanism; posthumanism cannot be fully formed without resolving the roles of disability and neurodiversity and the telos of the Other in a posthuman world. Fundamental to my argument for a reconfigured posthuman Other is an unpacking of Vivian Sobchacks' techno-human dualistic juxtaposition of "proud to be flesh" and "the desire to be wired" (Braidotti 89) where the former represents the Ego of the Western, majoritarian Self and where the latter represents the marginalized, posthuman Other. In this case, that Other is embodied in portrayal by the fictionalized autistic techno-savant.

Before the arrival of the autistic, the concept of the Other has been pervasive in oral, written, and visual traditions in rhetorical efforts to define the human. From the Heideggerian *mitsein* or "being with" to the South African philosophy of *ubuntu* articulated by Michael Onyebuchi Eze as the idea that "a person is a person through other people,"²⁹ the idea of Self-

²⁹ "A person is a person through other people' strikes an affirmation of one's humanity through recognition of an 'other' in his or her uniqueness and difference. It is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation in which the 'other' becomes a mirror (but only a mirror) for my subjectivity. This idealism suggests to us that humanity is not embedded in my person solely as an individual; my humanity is co-substantively bestowed upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to sustain this otherness creation. And if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am. The 'I am' is not a rigid subject, but a dynamic self-constitution dependent on this otherness creation of relation and distance." (Eze, M.O. *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa*, pp. 190–191)

Other relationality has been indispensable as a means of subjective identity formation. In both theory and in practice, the creation of the Self tends to depend upon opposition and marginalization as bedrock elements in identity formation. The idea of the Other finds early etymological roots in Western conceptions of alienation in the form of the “barbarian” (literally, “one who does not speak Greek”), an alienated Other constructed to serve as a foil for Hellenistic imperialism. Although ranging in scope and definition from Edward Said’s concept of the Other as “a projection of the Western view that constructs it” (1863) to bell hooks’ frustration over the postmodern use of “difference and Otherness to provide oppositional political meaning, legitimacy, and immediacy” (2509) to Jacques Lacan’s insistence that “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other,” (*Seminar XI*, 235) and to Rosi Braidotti’s “new forms of social connection with these techno-others” (103), all share the basic premise of the Other as indispensable to, yet inevitably alien and apart from, the conception of the Western white male Self. The autistic techno-savant exists as the answer to the serious questions Braidotti raises “as to the very structures of our shared identity – as humans – amidst the complexity of contemporary science, politics and international relations...in our globalized, technologically mediated societies” (2). The autistic savant, as the ultimate personification of technological mediation, serves as a tailor-made model for Braidotti’s contemporary understanding of the Other and as a unique posthuman archetype at the tail end of a lineage of marginalized, Othered figures.

Braidotti’s examination of this concept is relevant albeit imperfect as a unifying theoretical foundation considering the tendency of the autistic to be portrayed as an imagined prototypical posthuman in a technocentric era. Characterized physically by the streamlined “Apple Aesthetic” described in the previous chapter and intellectually by superhuman mental processing speed, the autistic techno-savant in portrayal represents an Other who is now more

systematically networked and more logical than the neurotypical protagonist with whom he is both paired and contrasted. Instead of, or perhaps more accurately, in addition to being marginalized, he is apotheosized, a sought-after techno-human singularity who personifies the biological access to unlimited information that the neurotypical male, in order, lacks, fears, and then covets. The incarnation of the posthuman and no longer the “Self’s shadow” (Spivak 2114), the asexual autistic savant exists outside of gender and represents a largely self-exiled outsider who bridges binaries of female and male, centre and margin, disabled and abled, colonized and colonizer, and ultimately, of Self and Other, although, as I will demonstrate, a racialized black and white dualism remains entrenched as ethnic minority Others are being supplanted by a nearly universally white Other in the form of the portrayed autistic.

Although much of posthumanist speculation relies upon a reconciliation of such binaries, the autistic is singularly and simultaneously positioned both within and outside of the Humanist tradition. If I accept Claire Colebrook’s claim that “...humanity is and must be parasitic: it lives only in its robbing and destruction of a life that is not its own” (178), then the autistic embodies much of the posthuman ideal: The portrayed autistic does not pollute, waste, spend, oppress, consume, produce, colonize, discriminate, or rely on others in any detrimental socially inter-relational way. As the personification of honesty and pacifism, he neither robs nor destroys. And yet, unlike other disabled or otherwise marginalized figures, he is neither parasite nor predator but instead possesses unique access to power by way of a neurological kinship with and access to digital information systems. He defies most of the Humanist, anthropocentric traits lamented by posthumanism, although his hypermasculinity and extreme self-centeredness remain problematic and point to rhetorical manipulations of a created character whose existence speaks to the necessity of subjective identity formation through opposition and to a disruption of fundamental

notions of contemporary masculinity. A central purpose in my argument, therefore, is the reconciliation of the autistic figure as a posthuman prototype or else as a posthuman destabiliser. For the white, neurotypical majoritarian male in the face of a looming posthuman ontology, is the autistic adversary or advocate? While it is tempting to split the difference, I will attempt to prove the latter with the caveat that that autistic Other, unlike his predecessors, is poised to supplant the majoritarian male in pop culture representation. Despite the myriad autistic traits that look posthuman, the autistic character is being used instead to further the Humanist cause. In an age of informatics of power and of anticipated nano and neurotechnologies, the autistic techno-savant fulfills a role that can no longer be filled by animalised, racialised, disabled, or prosthetic Others.

Autism, posthumanism, and the concept of Othering belong in the same conversation. With its emphasis on decentralized and destabilized ontologies and its interrogation of human subjectivity in Humanist terms, posthumanism serves, as autism scholar Stuart Murray proposes, “as a potentially radically productive space for autism.” (“Posthuman” 55). Within that space, autism vacillates in production and in popular consciousness between being consigned as another in a long series of marginalised Others, or else becoming a new standard-bearer of masculinity in a technocentric era. At first glance, the former may seem the likeliest outcome. After all, autism is identified as a disability and is frequently spoken of, clinically and in popular discourse, in terms of a deficit model. However, it is the latter proposition, the autistic as a marginalised figure who exceeds his Otherness, who challenges established notions of normative subjectivity, who possesses an unassailable and incorruptible agency, and who recalibrates conceptions of the posthuman male, that is evidenced by the visual rhetoric of autism in portrayal.

The prototypical male of the Humanist tradition has been defined, often to the detriment of other living organisms and of marginalized human beings, by the degree to which he differentiates himself from and elevates himself over an Other. Otherness is neither innate nor does it emerge organically; rather, it is a deliberate rhetorical construction applied by majoritarian groups seeking to establish and to maintain socio-political, economic, and cultural hegemony. That sense of the Other as being manufactured is present in the autistic with the exception that the autistic, for the first time, as I will demonstrate, threatens to usurp the manufacturer. This area of inquiry is vital as it extends beyond the academy and beyond the visual rhetorical devices incorporated in representations of autism; understanding the autistic Other in portrayal has significant real-world implications for people living with autism, for stakeholders in the autism community, and for a more complete understanding of what it means to be human in a digital world.

HOW TO CONSTRUCT AN AUTISTIC OTHER (TRAJECTORY AND TELOS)

In this section, I will address the unique paradox of the manufactured autistic techno-savant. Existing as he does outside of capitalist imperatives, removed from responsibility for manmade global crises, androgynous beyond the performative constructs of gender and sexuality, politically and socially disinterested, and in perceived biological harmony with digital technology, the autistic techno-savant looks like a posthuman. At the same time, with his deficient empathy, tendency toward systemization, hypermasculinity (albeit asexual), and extreme technocentrism, he also looks like the embodiment of the retrogressive, phallogentric Humanist male.

How can these mutually-exclusive states of being be reconciled? The answer exists at the intersection where the enigmatic autistic serves simultaneously as an indicator of an omission in posthuman theory and as a lifeline for traditional concepts of masculinity in the face of posthumanism's implicit (and occasionally explicit) indictment of phallocentrism. The autistic as a contemporary Other encapsulates this dilemma, introduces a unique reification of disability and super-ability into the posthuman conversation, and provides a rhetorical resolution to the neglected complexities inherent in conceptions of male subjectivity in a posthuman world. Although the rhetorical function of the autistic in popular culture tends to be elusive amidst the background noise of the other generic structures he inhabits, the process of identifying the cultural motives for the creation this new Other is relatively transparent.

Both posthumanism and the presence of the autistic Other are driven by extinction possibilities. With the evolution of digital, nano, and neuro-technologies and with accompanying elevations in the socio-economic status and political power of historically marginalized groups, the prototypical, heteronormative white male finds himself threatened not by the hypothesized extinction of the species but by the possibility of the extinction of masculinity and of white ethnicity as the default loci of power. Rather than the mass, mushroom-cloud extinction of humanity or the extinction of a non-human species due to climate change, urbanization, deforestation, or war, the autistic techno-savant gestures toward an extinction, not of the human, but specifically of cultural understandings of and hierarchical superiority of the heteronormative, neurotypical human male. Everything about the autistic techno-savant, from his autonomously developed subjectivity to his cold reliance on logic to his apparent lack of emotional reciprocity, challenges some of the most essential notions of what it means to be human. Understanding that posthumanism conceals an agenda, intentional or not, of post-phallocentrism, post-

heteronormativity, and post-whiteness, the white heteronormative male finds himself at an existential cross-roads. As he has done in the past when confronted by illusory terrors of his own creation, he latches onto a convenient, constructed figure that he believes best represents what he must become to remain the human prototype, the apex of living organisms, around which all others rotate and against whom all others are defined. The autistic techno-savant is an agent for Humanist survival in a posthuman disguise.

If the autistic is such an agent, then he is unusual in that he is one that normative, able-bodied, neurotypical man finds that he cannot marginalize the way he has done with others in the past. Because this Other refuses both assimilation and ostracization (because, possessed of an apparently autonomously developed subjectivity, he is already internally ostracized), and because he has access to contemporary modes of power and language in a way that previous Others do not, the white male purveyor of popular culture embraces this new Other by way of representation. This, he discovers, is problematic because autistics are the personification of certain entrenched codes of masculinity, but the portrayed autistic does not engage in the interrelationality of socialization or of romance nor is he commonly portrayed as sexual, perhaps the most embedded and relied-upon of stereotypically masculine attributes. To overcome this deficit in the created character, the autistic is constructed as a techno-savant and is frequently paired with a heteronormative alpha male where the autistic can maintain a type of masculine supremacy but still experience love, albeit invariably homoerotic rather than hetero or homosexual. In this sense, the autistic now represents, for the incipiently disenfranchised male, the ultimate posthuman figure: an embodied, male, techno-human singularity who speaks the digital language of power, and who exists without the need for women.³⁰

³⁰ I will explore this dynamic in greater depth in Chapter 4 with a discussion of the archetypal, homoerotic bromance.

The concept of the Other cannot be understood without first reconciling this process of ostracization and embrace. To navigate this dilemma, I must first engage with the “process by which representations of the monstrous, the other and the alien are produced, because such images function both to iterate and to undermine understandings of normative human nature” (Graham 60). This concept of the dualistic functionality of the Other among the normative is certainly as old as the concept of the Self, for the latter cannot seem to exist, at least in Western discourse, without the former. Braidotti asks,

[W]hat do we do with the regular and systematic recurrence of exclusion of always the same others; and this kind of persistence of the process of othering? It is always the women, it is always the non-whites or the blacks, it is always the children, it is always the physically disabled, it is always the physical environment. There is a recurrence, a repetition of certain themes of exclusion. (Butler, Braidotti interview)

While I agree that distinct patterns emerge in the characteristics and utility of the marginalized Other, Braidotti’s question need not be asked rhetorically. I would argue instead that the process of creating the Other is motivated by a majoritarian sense of entitlement combined with a fear of lost hegemony, a self-preservative degree of paranoia, and a need to define and to solidify the Self not simply through differentiation but through an assertion of supremacy. This assertion of supremacy has not historically flowed in the opposite direction; that is, white heteronormative men of the Global North have rarely found themselves as the victimized Other at the hands of animals, ethnic minorities, the non-heteronormative, women, the disabled, or the mechanized. The autistic Other is unique in that he possesses the potential to supplant the majoritarian male. It is this potential that makes the autistic techno-savant a threatening figure and that motivates the

majoritarian male to keep him close as a model of masculinity but distant and marginalized as an Other.

The autistic as a marginalized figure does not exist in isolation, nor was this figure created in a vacuum. To round out existing understandings of the interrelational Self and of autism as a clinical condition and as a cultural construct, I must first locate the autistic Other in a historical context. Long before the portrayed autistic, the Other has been represented in myriad ways throughout Western history, literature, and popular culture. Although the concept and the incarnation of the Other are embedded in Western consciousness as old as archetype, historically, a clear progression has manifested itself in the form the Other has taken over time. The autistic Other has his predecessors in animal, racial, disabled, and then mechanised Others, each of which I will examine in turn as each represents a missing element in the completion of the normative subjective Self.

In early cases, a neurotypical protagonist, portrayed almost invariably as a majoritarian alpha male, was paired with an animalistic Other, as in *Legend of Tarzan*, *The Jungle Book*, *Doctor Doolittle*, and as far back as the 2,100 B.C.E Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*. Political scientist Stephan Dolgert cites Giorgio Agamben's description from *The Open: Man and Animal*, in which Agamben

asserts the existence of "the anthropological machine," a collective cultural construct by which "the human" is continually defined *vis a vis* an Other, usually termed "animal," whose constant articulation requires the existence of an animal substrate which has the main function of serving as that-which-is-to-be-overcome." (Dolgert, "Devolve" 3)

For literary critic Leslie Fiedler, these "animal substrates" are "the animal Freaks or beast-men, ambiguous hybrids who have haunted our dreams ever since Homo sapiens first began to think

of himself as separate from the other beasts in the field” (*Freaks* 149). This animal Other, both reviled and required, enabled the neurotypical to establish his identity as a Self, separate from and, by unspoken extension, superior to animals in a relationship that Braidotti characterizes by its “epistemic violence...which was and still is practiced against non-human animals and the dehumanized social and political ‘others’ of the humanist norm” (30). The pairing of the human Gilgamesh, for example, with the bestial Enkidu encapsulates the dualism of “norm” versus “others” described by Braidotti. However, Braidotti’s description may not fully capture either the motivation behind this “epistemic violence” nor the spiritual reconciliation that follows. In each case, building upon Dolgert’s claim, the Other is not simply “that-which-is-to-be-overcome”; rather, the Other represents the externalized part of the Self that must be embraced and re-integrated to satisfy subjective identity formation.

Dolgert insists that it is the “alien status of Enkidu that enacts...the theological liberation of Gilgamesh” (“Devolve” 18). In recognizing that Enkidu “crosses many boundaries and borders, since he is both animal-human as well as woman-man” (18), Dolgert highlights the reconciliation meant to redeem the human after the initial othering. In *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu is the dehumanized, animalistic wild side without which Gilgamesh, the man of society and culture, is not complete. Dolgert argues that

[m]any authors insist in seeing the story of the Epic...as one of radical boundary-drawing: that we see what it means to be human by contrast with the “natural” state of Enkidu before his transformation from animal to man, and Enkidu’s loss of communion with Nature and his eventual death are seen as the two sacrifices necessary to fully cement Gilgamesh’s humanity. (“Devolve” 4)

Gilgamesh outliving Enkidu, a typical dynamic in most literary and cinematic relationships involving an othered partner, indicates that the reconciliation to ensure majoritarian hegemony must remain spiritual rather than develop as a matter of lived, social fact. This animalised Other served a specific purpose at a specific time. While some elements of that purpose remain, others have changed as has the epoch in which such Self-Other dualisms occur. The autistic, had he been imagined at the time, could not have functioned in the same capacity as the animalistic Other. Instead, a new Other was needed.

After the animalised Other served his purpose, he was replaced by a racialised, ethnic Other. Perhaps because of its often-violent history as both colony and colonizer and its voluminous, heterogeneous population, the United States is replete with examples in its literature, especially prominent in the 19th century age of transcendentalism, of this transformation and progression of the Other from animal to racial or ethnic minority. In *Moby Dick*, Ishmael shares a bed, reluctantly at first and then with the mutual affection of a married couple, with Queequeg, the tattooed Polynesian harpooner. Ishmael, bogged down in a crisis of existentialist detachment, comes to define himself by the exotic and soul-enriching sense of adventure that he lacks and that Queequeg personifies. In Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, Huck, a white boy and son of the town drunk, pairs with Jim, a black man whose morality and dignity in the face of the ultimate indignity of slavery enable Huck to see and to escape the hypocrisy of a racist, duplicitous, and violent society and "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest." In the *Leatherstocking Tales*, James Fennimore Cooper provides the pairing of Natty Bumppo, a white settler, with Chingachgook where the partnered Other, a Native American this time, has come to represent spirituality and harmony with nature. Other literary and cultural examples of this dynamic include the Kanakan Hope from Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*,

TV's Lone Ranger and Tonto, and McMurphy and Chief from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the latter serving as a rare exception where the Other, a 6'8" schizophrenic Indian, outlives McMurphy, the white male protagonist.³¹ Like the autistic Other, this racialised Other begins as feared, becomes understood and embraced, and is a figure the protagonist needs in order to survive. Unlike the autistic Other, this racialised Other is non-white, removed from culture, intellectual rather than bodily-based, and, in the end of the narrative, he disappears or dies. Like the animalised Other, the racialised Other serves a specific purpose at a specific time. Neither the purpose nor the time, however, is yet suitable for the arrival of the autistic.

Instead, the racialised Other gave way to a disabled or disfigured Other with characters such as Quasimodo, John Merrick, Forrest Gump, Melvin Udal, and a host of "human oddities" from conjoined twins and bearded women to giants and dwarves. Here, Fiedler provides the insight concerning "...the way in which such freaks are simultaneously understood as symbols of the absolute Other and the essential self" (*Tyranny* 147). It is the sense of the absolute and of the essential that appears at first to belie the occasionally horrific discriminatory practices that characterize both fictionalized and often real-world engagement with and treatment of the disabled by the able-bodied. As Barry Grant illustrates, the Other represents an invited assault on cultural order: "Because of this difference in the treatment of the Other, as [Vivian] Sobchack observes, horror monsters threaten the disruption of moral and natural order, while those of science fiction address the disruption of the social order" (Grant 18). Like the animalised and autistic Others, the disabled or disfigured Other also begins as feared only to become understood and embraced, at least by audiences, by the end of the narrative. While the disabled or disfigured

³¹ Included in this category are the trope of the literal alien Other as seen in movies such as *E.T.*, *Enemy Mine*, *Alien Nation*, *Star Wars*, and *Avatar*, among many others where a white heteronormative male engages in an adversarial-turned-kindred partnership with an extra-terrestrial, alienated Other.

Other, however, represents a normative fear of physical trauma and deformity, the autistic Other tends to be portrayed as the epitome of physical symmetry.

The racialised Other was then replaced by mechanical attachment represented by the cyborg where the Other is a machine, literally internalized as symbolic of man's search for Self within the prosthetic technology of the time. The Other, in this case, presents as a human-machine hybrid as illustrated by characters such as The Bionic Man, The Terminator, RoboCop, Cable, Iron Man, Cyborg, The Borg, Data, Darth Vader, and European model and performance artist Viktoria Modesta. In such cases, subjectivity tends to be based upon disruptions to the physical body where the body itself is internally othered and may be perceived as both a substantive component of the essential Self and as emblematic of the body's frailty, of human vulnerability, of visceral repulsion to fragmentation, and of the window for restoration through biotechnical artificiality. Donna Haraway invokes the cyborg as "a kind of disassembled *and* reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self" (163, my italics). It is within the space of Haraway's "and," a site of conflict and conjunction that she refers to elsewhere as a "border war" (150), that I have located the tension between Self and Other in its dualistic manifestations from civilized/animal to white/black and to abled/disabled. In the autistic/neurotypical dualism, the autistic is the most recent tenant of this space. Like the autistic, the human-mechanical hybrid is a "creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality" (150). Unlike the cyborg, however, the autistic transcends Haraway's "organism and machine" (163) dualism by transforming the paradigm to one of organism and cyber-informatics. While Haraway articulates modern to postmodern "transitions from the comfortable old hierarchical dominations to the scary new networks" (161) in a table she designates as "the informatics of domination," she understandably has not anticipated the arrival of 21st-century posthumanism nor of the

represented autistic techno-savant. To provide for the presence of the portrayed autistic in a posthuman telos, I have constructed a third column in which I extend and update Haraway's "informatics of domination":

MODERN →	POSTMODERN →	POSTHUMAN (AUTISTIC OTHER)
Representation	Simulation	Uncanny Valley
Bourgeois novel, realism	Science fiction, postmodernism	Mainstream, posthumanism
Organism	Biotic Component	Techno-biological
Depth, integrity	Surface, boundary	Blurred boundaries
Heat	Noise	Sensory-aversion
Biology as clinical practice	Biology as inscription	Biology as imperfect
Physiology	Communications engineering	Phenomenology
Small group	Subsystem	Autonomous
Perfection	Optimization	Savantism
Eugenics	Population Control	Virginity, Bromance
Decadence, <i>Magic Mountain</i>	Obsolescence, <i>Future Shock</i>	Autism, <i>Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time</i>
Hygiene	Stress Management	Applied Behavioural Analysis
Microbiology, tuberculosis	Immunology, AIDS	Neurodiversity
Organic division of labour	Ergonomics/cybernetics of labour	Elimination / Outsourcing of physical labour
Functional specialization	Modular construction	“Apple aesthetic”

Figure 6 - autism-themed update to Haraway's “informatics of domination”

The “hierarchical network” at each level from left to right begins with the body, moves to the mind, and ends with the autistic techno-savant. With exponentially advancing digital technologies, and as marginalised groups (ethnic minorities, the disabled, women, etc.) began to assert their individual subjectivities and claim their promised civil rights, the table can be read as “the modern became postmodern, which is now on the verge of becoming posthuman,” or body-centered, which became mind-centered, which became brain-centered with the autistic as the vehicle for this new ontology. My illustration of this trajectory completes Haraway’s “informatics of domination” and enables me to position the autistic as the penultimate step before being human becomes defined in terms of disembodied techno-consciousness, or the ultimate posthuman.

The progression in categorical form from animal to racial to disabled to mechanical is neither incidental nor accidental. In nearly all cases, the characters embodying Self and Other begin as or are culturally set up to be enemies only to become intimate friends by the end of the narrative. My question is not “Why does this pattern of marginalization and reconciliation exist?” but “What does the epistemic Other reveal about contemporaneous human relationships with digital technologies and about perceived threats to majoritarian subjectivity and hegemony?” The identification of the epistemic Other, in this case it is the autistic, is a fundamental step in answering that question.

Surface variations over epochs notwithstanding, each of the incarnated Others – animalized, racialized, disabled, and mechanized – enumerated above has been at one time “rendered as pejoration, pathologized and cast out of normality, on the side of anomaly,

deviance, monstrosity, and bestiality” (Braidotti 68). The autistic techno-savant conforms to this mold; however, two characteristics make him exceptional. The first is his relative harmlessness. Unlike the feral human, the sexualized black man, the spiritual Indian, the disabled and terrifying “freak,” the dangerous cyborg, or even the omnipresent woman, he poses no violent, political, physical, or sexual threat to the majoritarian white male. The autistic techno-savant, as I illustrate in the previous chapter, shares a distinct physiognomy and is seldom shown as possessed of emotion, sex drive, or political consciousness. The portrayed autistic has no desire to join the majoritarian mainstream, overthrow existing power structures, enter a symbiotic state of inter-relationality, engage in conflict or war, or to be anything other than what he is. His incorruptibility and his obdurate and autonomously developed subjectivity make him suspect but also outfit him as a potential life-preserver for the besieged posthuman male.

The second characteristic that makes the autistic techno-savant exceptional as a posthuman Other is the immediacy with which he is needed and the uniquely practical function he serves at the side of or juxtaposed against a neurotypical alpha male. In postmodernity, the neurotypical has found himself immersed in a technocentric era whose properties and parameters are developing exponentially before his eyes. Although Braidotti observes “a tendency to defer confrontation with the more immediate Other,” (Butler, Braidotti interview) that confrontation is being thrust with greater urgency upon the neurotypical due to his desire and need to access technology in a way that, for the moment, only the rhetorically manufactured autistic techno-savant is capable. It is this distinct and unique ability that forms the essence and the paradox of the posthuman Other. The autistic’s social disability is superseded, at least in popular consciousness, by his superhuman technological ability. The autistic Other, as with his archetypal predecessors, has transitioned into an object of attraction while still being held at

arm's length as an object of inquiry and of remote fascination; each pairing of the Self with the Other embodies the hope for reconciliation and for a unification of the subjective Self. The fictionalized neurotypical-autistic pairings fascinate because of the possibility for love without intimacy as the ultimate expression of the reunion of a subjective Self with an objectified Other.

An inextricable link exists between the established Self, his exclusion of the Other, and identity formation. According to Foucault,

“[t]he history of madness would be the history of the Other – of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same – of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities.” (xxvi)

Foucault's invocation of order as a constructed imposition must not be overlooked as the autistic, too, is such a constructed imposition. Such dualisms may be inevitable in any culture that equates subjectivity with a relative position on a socially-constructed hierarchy. The prospect of an order based on sameness, beyond being a common trope of dystopian science fiction, threatens in Lacanian terms the ability for identity formation and subject-object separation. It is in the overlap between the history of madness and the history of order that the autistic Other finds an identity and a purpose. Far more than his Othered predecessors and more than the schizophrenic with whom the autistic has been historically conflated, the autistic best embodies the traits of both madness *and* of order. In a classic catch-22, the autistic is perceived as mentally disabled because he is *too* systematically ordered and *too* autonomous, traits that are otherwise sought after by neurotypicals. This is the dilemma at the heart of the so-called “autism puzzle.”

As I will continue to demonstrate, it is the neurotypicals rather than the autistics who are the puzzle in search of its missing piece.

Today's autistic Other, as the Other always does, serves as a stand-in for what is lacking in the culturally normative Self. This action occurs in a relationship symbolic of what Braidotti refers to as a "postanthropocentric, transversal structural link in the position of these embodied non-human subjects that were previously known as the 'others' of the anthropocentric and humanistic 'Man'" (103). Because today's autistic Other is referred to frequently as a computer or as an alien, the autistic techno-savant is in keeping with Braidotti's return to the "non-human" in this context. This does not limit the autistic's significance. Despite being relegated to the position of "partner" or "sidekick," it is the Other who tends to capture the popular imagination. With the autistic, this occurs at least in part because Western society tends to recognize "a new social nexus and new forms of social connection with these techno-others" (Ibid., 103). In portrayal, the autistic techno-savant serves as the newest and most appropriate in a historical lineage of partnered Others. This makes the portrayed autistic, like his predecessor Others, an indispensable figure in understanding the relationship of man to technology in the epistemic shadow of posthumanism.

Given the progression of the Other, I must now ask and answer the next logical question: "What does autism, and specifically autistic savantism, offer that other historically marginalized Others do not?" In a technocentric era of commodified information and big data, the answer, I argue, begins in the romanticized notion of the autistic techno-savant as being plugged in to a digital world of circuitry, computers, and fibre optics in what Vivian Sobchack calls a "...shift in sensibility toward the alien Other [that] seems also a function of that new technology which has transformed the spatial and temporal shape of our world and our world view" (222). This is the

chicken-and-egg question of the digital age: whether, as Sobchack suggests, technology transforms a world view or whether it is an evolving world view – in this case one regarding the status, role, and degree of consideration afforded to animals, ethnic minorities, and the disabled – that shapes the level of intimacy involved in techno-human interactions. As the cumbersome mechanical technologies of the Industrial Revolution and age of analog technologies gave way to the increasingly microscopic technologies of the 20th and 21st centuries, operating systems, both mechanical and neurological, have become less visible, more influential, and more biologically integrated on a commensurate scale. This has led to an increased pursuit of nano and neuro-technologies, systems designed to replicate the newly visible spaces of the human brain. The next step appears in the form of digital technologies that replicate not only human mental outputs but that also attempt to reproduce the neurological processes and pathways that lead up to those outputs. It is not uncommon today to hear the human brain spoken of in terms of digital technology and operating systems. In discussing how the mind works, N. Katherine Hayles, for example, refers to “organs of technical elements,” (103), “telegraphy as body analogy,” (147) “bodies and information entwined,” (148) and the “reconfiguration of human bodies and technics.” (151) Hardly unique to Hayles, examples throughout readings in posthumanism include terms such as “memory transfer,” “code,” “wiring,” “circuits,” “fibre bundles,” and “information processing system” when referencing the human neural network. The fact that the Internet has become arguably the most salient metaphor of the 21st century makes the appropriation of the autistic techno-savant as the posthuman Other even more anticipated, understandable, and meaningful.

Replacing the notion of Other as purely bodily, the defining characteristic of the posthuman Other is his extraordinary mind. Since 1988 when *Rain Man* brought the concept of

the autistic savant into the mainstream, the autistic has become a convenient metaphor in his own right for biologic access to technology. As part of a rhetorical progression, the autistic techno-savant personifies a new Otherness based not on bestial, racialized, bodily, or mechanical connection as can be seen with his othered predecessors but is instead networked to information on a neurological level. Nearly all instances of the autistic techno-savant in portrayal demonstrate this. Because this is a project in visual rhetoric, I find it helpful to highlight specific examples: Characters such as Raymond Babbitt (*Rain Man*), Simon Lynch (*Mercury Rising*), Gary Bell (*Alphas*), Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*), Spock (*Star Trek*), Abed (*Community*), and Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*) show the autistic techno-savant as having direct, biologic access to the information network. Director Barry Levinson shows Rain Man scanning cards with mathematical precision at a Las Vegas casino table. Gary Bell scans the air in front of him (an action clinically referred to in the autism community as “stimming”) as a means of viewing a network of data visible only to himself. Simon Lynch outperforms the CIA computers in deciphering military codes embedded in crossword puzzles by government cryptographers. Sherlock Holmes is frequently shown with text, images, equations, and geographic locations superimposed over his face as if to offer a window into his flawed but formidable mind. In *Community*, Jeff says to Abed, “You’re a computer. Scan your mainframe for some juicy memories” (2:21 “Paradigms of Human Memory”). Sheldon, afraid that he will not live to witness the anticipated techno-human singularity “when man will be able to transfer his consciousness into machines and achieve immortality,” re-invents himself as a “Mobile Virtual Presence Device,” essentially a robot that Penny dubs “Shelbot” that he controls remotely from his bedroom (4:2 “The Cruciferous Vegetable Amplification”). Although many of these examples are presented as jokes and evoke the intended laughter, they point to a deeper truth in

the relationship of neurotypicals to technology by way of the autistic techno-savant. Such visual rhetorical constructions serve the dual purpose of providing an imagined insight into the enigmatic autistic mind and of offering a tantalizing, hypothetical illustration of a fully integrated techno-human consciousness, albeit still in masculine, ethnically white terms. While intended on the surface to offer insight, usually played to evoke laughs or awe, into the functioning of the atypical mind of a marginalized member of the community, such exaggerations more likely serve to demonstrate the clinical fact of a differently-wired brain while offering a fantastic, specious, and unhelpful but satisfying “answer” to the puzzle of autism.

These optics matter. Given the puzzling nature of autism and common understandings of its impenetrability, the autistic techno-savant tends to be portrayed as indecipherable but with glimpses through a manufactured window into his world. The audience is made privy to an inscrutable mind that appears to portend a state of radical evolution in human mental processing as popular, comfortable understandings of the mind as a simple command centre give way to fantasies of the mind as a super-powered techno consciousness. Unlike previous incarnations of the marginalized Other where otherness was based upon the phenomenological body, be it bestial, racial, disabled, or mechanical, the autistic techno-savant, while not yet fully disembodied, pivots the focus from the body to the brain. The essential nature of previous Others could be seen, felt, and understood on a tangible, visceral level. Differences from the white majoritarian male were bodily. These were “almost-human” bodies. They were hairy, dark, contorted, partial, or mechanical. In the eyes of the white male protagonist, these Others were superior in some physical or spiritual ways while lacking in intellect, language, and culture, key components in the Humanist definition of the human. The Other could be wise but never more intelligent than his white counterpart. He could speak but never with syntactical precision or

rhetorical eloquence. The Other could be strong but not heroic. He could have a tribe but not a family. And in each case, the Other disappears or dies. In the case of the autistic techno-savant, Otherness is defined as being both tragically further behind and wistfully further ahead of neurotypical human beings along the human-computer spectrum. Although each of the autistic characters in question continues to be embodied as a corporeal manifestation in a physical world, his defining characteristic remains his neurocentrism. In this way, the “computer,” originally a term designating a person who computes, has morphed from a human being into the technological object and now back into the human being as represented by the embodied autistic. In the eyes of the majoritarian Self, this unfurling makes the autistic both sought after and suspect, two foundational principles of the historic Other.

The metaphorical notion of the autistic techno-savant as a pure techno-consciousness must not be extrapolated to far, however. Contrary to Hayles who envisions a trajectory of the human as increasingly disembodied, the autistic techno-savant in popular portrayal rescues the posthuman from virtuality and functions as a re-embodiment of disembodied information technology. Instead of human beings becoming slaves to digital technology, a common contemporary lament, the autistic is perceived as having enslaved and embodied the essence of digital technology. The merger of the human with the technological tends to portend the end of the human as a corporal entity. For now, the autistic belies this trope of speculative science fiction. Unlike the Terminator (*Terminator*), Bishop (*Alien*), Data (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*), Seven-of-Nine (*Star Trek: Voyager*), Roy Batty (*Blade Runner*), or 16-year-old Tom (*iBoy*) who gains access to the digital network after having a piece of his cell phone embedded in his brain, the autistic is purely human with no added prosthetic or computer parts. While the trajectory for the autistic techno-savant does point ultimately to a type of fetishized

disembodiment³², most incarnations in popular culture preserve and even elevate the autistic's phenomenological presence and physical prowess. Sherlock has exceptional fighting skills and is often shown running with his trench-coat flapping, Batman-like, behind him. Alan Turing, in life and as portrayed in *The Imitation Game*, was known as a prolific and tireless runner. Abed defeats Troy in running, basketball, and arm-wrestling. Spock is a formidable physical opponent for any adversary. Sheldon Cooper, although not portrayed as a powerful physical presence, is still played by the 6'1" Jim Parsons who significantly stands more than six inches taller than his next tallest co-star. As an Other against whom the neurotypical can now juxtapose himself, the portrayed autistic sidetracks the quest to see humanity in virtual systems to seeing information systems embedded and embodied in the autistic. Such images move the portrayed autistic away from the uncoordinated, physically awkward, and helpless Rain Man prototype and begin instead to nudge the autistic from disabled to super-abled and from disembodied to re-embodied while keeping him nonetheless Othered as a figure either more human than human or less human than human but never appreciated as fully human in a way prescribed by posthuman ontology.

In these cases, the Other contributes by his exclusion. He is pushed away by the neurotypical with one hand and embraced with the other. The autistic does not offer access to anything spiritual, moral, or sexual. Immune from capitalism and other fundamental socio-economic pillars of Western enterprise, the autistic offers nothing in terms of production or consumption. He is not interested in profit, power, nor in the acquisition of wealth. Like the schizophrenic of Deleuze and Guattari, he possesses a certain cultural imperviousness by his inability to be programmed, bribed, bought, or sold. Despite his apparent impenetrability, what he does offer is access. This is why the portrayed autistic matters. His hard-wired access to

³² To be addressed in Chapter 5.

portals of information represents for the neurotypical a means to solidify his own place at the top of the hegemonic apex or else risk falling into posthuman irrelevance. Braidotti points out the means by which "...the humanist image of thought also sets the frame for a self-congratulating relationship of Man to himself, which confirms the dominant subject as much in what he includes as his core characteristics as in what he excludes as 'other'" (67). Although open to being read as cynicism, Braidotti illustrates both the level of contrivance that informs this systematic Othering and the potential to reunite the included and excluded characteristics respectively of the Self and the Other. Where Braidotti falls short, however, is in her understandable but uninterrogated suggestion that the Other is simply excluded when, in fact, the root of the humanist fear of lost hegemony is grounded in the white neurotypical male's fear that he may be the one who might be excluded or, more accurately, rendered extinct. The Self-Other relationship is not a zero-sum dualism of inclusion or exclusion. Nor is it as simple as a phenomenological Self-Other reversibility. Instead, the complexity of the relationship is perhaps more accurately described by Merleau-Ponty in his chapter "The Other in the Human World" from the *Phenomenology of Perception* in which he observes that "...between this phenomenal body and the other person's phenomenal body...there is an internal relation that makes the other person *appear* as the completion of a system" (368, my italics). It is the "appearance" rather than the fact of a reconciliation of the Self-Other dualism that drives the relationship between the neurotypical and the autistic. In portrayal, autistic characters are figures whose bodies seek to engage in yet are prohibited from attaining equilibrium. With advances in digital, nano, and neuro-technologies increasing at exponential rates, the autistic, pitied, marginalized, and apotheosized, represents a deeper understanding of subjectivity through interrelationality where the excluded becomes indispensable to and inseparable from the "core characteristics" of the

included. The autistic is, therefore, an inside-outsider, one who is excluded with the physio-intellectual hand and embraced with the technophilic other.

The autistic, more than any of his predecessors, exemplifies and embodies a fear of an incomplete and imprecise notion of Humanist subjectivity. As a non-relational being of autonomous agency, the autistic exposes the Achilles' heel in the neurotypical's understanding of himself as the center of the existential universe around whom all other bodies necessarily rotate. The Other traditionally brings to the table what the neurotypical has been unable or willing to provide for himself. He is the ultimate and embodied "personal computer," sprinkled throughout popular culture as a tool to be used in the service of the neurotypical male. In his own mind, no longer in need of the Other as gateway to nature, as moral compass, or as noble savage, the alpha male of popular culture, for his own purposes and self-preservation, attempts to portray the autistic, not as Rousseau's noble savage, but as a noble savant, a discarded but still sought-after element of himself.³³ The marginalization itself is not new. What is new is that the marginalized autistic, far more so than the predecessor animal, racialized, disabled, or mechanized Other, is immune to the neurotypical's hegemony, cultural performativity, and a host of other embedded pressures and coercions to acculturate or else to remain forever excluded. The quest for completion is a staple in Western narratives. The neurotypical commonly searches for a missing or culturally-repressed element of his subjective Self. In *Blade Runner*, Deckard (Harrison Ford) encapsulates the motivating questions: "All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?" These are the exact questions that drive countless narratives across genres. As a

³³ In the next chapter, I will unpack and reconfigure the paradigm of the Noble Savage as morphing into what I have dubbed the "Noble Savant."

posthuman Other, the portrayed autistic is the existential answer to the question of what it means to be human amid encroaching intelligent technologies.

Having created a vast matrix of technological information systems, the neurotypical finds himself without the legend for his own map. Based on the Lacanian notion of the Other as “satisfying needs,” the autistic techno-savant satisfies the neurotypical’s need to come to terms with the technology that he has envisioned, created, and with which he now must cohabitate. Even though the neurotypical’s overt categorization and exclusion of Others is universally decried, tacitly accepted, and systematically practiced, Braidotti observes the gap in an appreciation and understanding of the need to perform such marginalizations at all: “The need for such exclusions itself, is for us [neurotypicals], an object of scientific inquiry, and yet, what we know of science, is built upon the omission of any reference to either the necessity of exclusion, or to the excluded groups” (O’Grady, interview). Perhaps scholars do not need to speculate quite so intently nor approach quite so coyly why such elisions exist in the discussion of the excluded Other. Wading through the tendency to talk around the issue, at their core, such exclusions derive from a sense by white heteronormative men that their status is built on shaky underpinnings and is facing both deeper interrogation and probably destruction. Perhaps the Self cannot exist in a vacuum. It is common in Western discourse to define the Self in relation to something external, and that “[d]ialectical and pejorative otherness induces structural ignorance about those who, by being others, are posited as the outside of major categorical divides in the attribution of Humanity” (Braidotti 28). At its core, marginalization of women, the disabled, and ethnic minority groups by the white majoritarian is nothing less than a demonstration of the dual imperatives of self-definition and self-preservation.

It is as if the unspoken and unrealized need to unite the Self with the Other is as powerful as the need to separate the Other from the Self in the first place. Before those needs can be satisfied, however, the neurotypical must find a way to reconcile with a being whom he has marginalized as disabled and has dismissed as irretrievably narcissistic and as lacking a proper sense of agency or of Self. Appropriately, the term “autism” has its origins in the Greek root “autos” meaning “self,” which is to say that the neurotypical community has inadvertently and ironically made Other a character for being too much of the Self. In this way, the autistic complicates the historical relationship of the majoritarian Self with the marginalized Other. It is within this fertile space of complication that the seeds of posthumanism take root. If posthumanism is an indictment of and replacement for an entrenched Self-Other dualism, then the autistic Other has come to represent the most elemental attribution of humanity in a posthuman world.

That the posthuman Other takes the form of a figure against whom the neurotypical has manifested hostility in the past is telling. Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock may be maligned in their fictional universes, yet who can imagine Kirk, Troy, Leonard, or Dr. Watson without their partnered autistic Other? Although counterintuitive, it seems to be the case that the promise of a reconciliation may serve as an initial influence in the majoritarian’s drive to elevate himself at the expense of a marginalized Other. It is possible that, beyond acquisitiveness, fear, envy, and ignorance, the neurotypical man of power secretly hopes to be forgiven for his transgressions against the Other and loved finally for himself.

Despite his harmlessness, the autistic techno-savant instills a new sense of fear in the neurotypical who finds himself in the paradoxical and mutually exclusive position of being unable to live with or without the Other. Past Others such as Enkidu, Queequeg, Jim, and

Chingachgook all disappear or die. Their usefulness stops just shy of cultural integration. The autistic techno-savant functions as an unusual Other in no small part because he survives, even thrives, from his marginalized position within society. The autistic techno-savant operates on a level to which the neurotypical can only aspire. Kirk maintains an intimacy beyond friendship with Spock, but he never embraces Spock's aloofness and rigid dedication to logic and science. Troy discovers that Abed is physically superior to him in nearly every way (1:11 "The Politics of Human Sexuality"). Sheldon Cooper cannot live without Leonard, a moment of bonding and separation anxiety neatly illustrated when Leonard finally marries Penny at the end of season eight but spends his wedding night with Sheldon. Molly Hooper, her romantic interest ignored by Sherlock, points out that Sherlock and Watson belong together, even observing in that Sherlock looks sad "when you think he can't see you" (2:3 "The Reichenbach Fall"). This is an indispensable Other, one who, for the first time, represents a serious threat to neurotypical hegemony while remaining an aspiration for what the majoritarian male might yet become. For the neurotypical, this is the fundamental problem posed by the autistic: Is the autistic simply the latest figure in a history of marginalised Others? Or does the autistic in representation portend a stage in human evolution that ushers in the embodied posthuman at the expense of the Humanist man? In his desire to evolve while maintaining his hegemonic presence in an era of technocentrism, the neurotypical hopes it will be the former but fears it may be the latter.

The Self-Other dualism is foundational to and essential for the conception and distribution of that Western hegemony. In a culture that defines itself by what it is not, it is inevitable that "this Eurocentric paradigm implies the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness as respectively the motor for and the cultural logic of universal Humanism" (Braidotti 15). Driven by that motor, trapped within that cultural logic, and yet the

accidental beneficiary of its binarism, the autistic techno-savant serves as a useful metaphor for the divide between the bodily, neurotypical Self and the ethereal techno-other. He is portrayed first as the embodiment of binarism, a human being who serves, functions, and manifests in nearly all ways as a computer, coded somehow at the moment of conception to think exclusively in ones and zeroes. He acts as a literal demonstration of what happens, not when a computer is given human consciousness, an idea fetishized throughout science fiction and its various sub-genres, but of what happens when a human brain is instead imbued with the “consciousness,” as it were, or the processing speed and mnemonic capacity of a computer. This element of epistemic techno-culture is a vital component to my argument for the autistic as a rhetorical construction designed as a roadmap for the neurotypical to navigate (or else to disrupt) the path from Humanism to posthumanism. As I have demonstrated, the Other is always a tool that is used in the service of a neurotypical understanding of his own subjectivity. The autistic techno-savant is the first of these tools that threatens to operate on its own, self-programmed terms.

Since the Turing Test of the 1940s, literature and science fiction of the computer age have fantasized about how a computer would perform if it were programmed somehow with human consciousness. The autistic techno-savant provides the opportunity to witness the reverse: a human being who, because of a rare neurological glitch, behaves with the precise logic, lack of empathy, and immense processing speed of a computer. In portrayal, the autistic is constructed as unnuanced and committed to thinking strictly in terms of black and white. He conforms religiously to a programmed, biologically-encoded pattern of behaviour. A reconciliation of such dualisms is evident in past Self-Other pairings: Enkidu resolves an animal-human binary for Gilgamesh; Jim resolves a black-white binary for Huck; Chingachgook resolves a native-settler binary for Natty Bumppo. Queequeg resolves an uninhibited-repressed binary for Ishmael.

Cyborgs such as the Bionic Man and RoboCop resolve a flesh-mechanical binary for the able-bodied. In parallel, the autistic techno-savant resolves a binary between the human majoritarian Self and digital technology. The autistic radically assaults and reconfigures the notion of binary logic as the driving force behind identity formation. He represents, instead, a unitary identity that has been co-opted by the neurotypical male, desperate in the face of an incoming wave of posthumanist provocation to cling to self-serving essential binarisms that have helped him to manhandle his way to a position of political, cultural, and socio-economic hegemony. It is not simply that the Self cannot be defined without relation to an externalised Other. The form that the Other takes matters. Feeling that he has reconciled himself with his animal, ethnic, and mechanised-prosthetic sides, the neurotypical has turned his attention to this new Other who relocates the site of subjectivity and identity formation from the incomplete cyborg body to the hard-wired autistic brain.

In noting that “[t]he technological other today – a mere assemblage of circuitry and feedback loops – functions in the realm of an egalitarian blurring of differences...,” (109) Braidotti connects the dots between the cyborg and the techno-savant. Haraway’s concept of cyborg imagery suggests “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 181); the posthuman autistic techno-savant is a unique Other who reconciles binaries through his *internalized* dualisms and by his appropriation by male creators of and participants in popular culture. As portrayed, autistic techno-savants such as Sherlock Holmes, Rain Man, Spock, Abed, Sheldon Cooper, and Gary Bell, appear as an “assemblage of circuitry” as they blur differences between what it means to be a computer and what it means to be a man. Abed tells a visibly upset Shirley that “I’ve spent so much time around computers your tears are just ones and zeros to me” (5:1 “Repilot”). When Sheldon

Cooper is informed that he is reminiscent in character and mannerism of C-3PO from *Star Wars*, he responds, “Don’t get me wrong. I’m flattered. I just don’t see it” (2:21 “The Vegas Renormalization”). Leonard Nimoy reports that “A major area of conflict was Bill’s [William Shatner’s] concern that Spock was getting ahead of Kirk in terms of problem-solving. Bill was worried that Kirk would seem unintelligent by contrast. And so lines of dialogue that had logically been Spock’s soon became Kirk’s” (Sheridan). Sherlock brags that he can “read a crime scene the way [John] can understand a human being” (3:2 “The Sign of Three”). Such renderings contradict Braidotti’s notion that the techno-other functions in the “realm of an egalitarian blurring of differences.” While this blurring is perhaps the *hope* of posthumanism, the exact opposite may more likely be the case. Instead of blurring differences, the autistic highlights a stumbling block in the posthuman ideal and is demonstrated as vulnerable for use as a rhetorical tool for continued male hegemonic dominance and control. Two contradictory ontologies are happening in the same space: The neurotypical male sees this autistic Other as his path to survival and, simultaneously, as a techno-human Sword of Damocles hovering over his head. For the neurotypical majoritarian male, the Other has always been a means to become a more complete human; the autistic techno-savant represents a rhetorical conflation of human and computer, which necessitates a radical re-conception of what it means to be human in the first place.

The “blurring” to which Braidotti refers manifests in popular culture as the next step in the lineage of the Other, past cyborg, and one step before the hypothesized singularity where human consciousness and technology merge at the expense of the corporeal body. That “blurring” is summarily illustrated in the movie *Lucy*, which culminates with Lucy (Scarlett Johansson) disintegrating into digital bits of information before vanishing into the ether as a

Godlike and significantly female techno-consciousness. As a binary, himself, and as a unifying entity between human and technology, the autistic techno-savant is the bridge between Haraway's cyborg and director Luc Besson's *Lucy*. According to Andy Miah in his chapter "Posthumanism: a Critical History," posthumanist N. Katherine Hayles "invites the suggestion – rather like Foucault – that the era of Man is approaching some form of end (invariably ideological, biological, or both)" and "explains how the body's boundaries have been compromised and that our current era is characterised by a desire to erase bodily burdens or, more accurately, to transform the body into information, non-matter" (7). But this step, proceeding as it does from the embodied, binary identity formation of Humanism to the prophesized disembodied, de-centralized, and egalitarian identity formation of posthumanism, skips over the autistic and the problematic theoretical obstruction, from the autonomous identify formation to the function as hypermasculine prototype, that he represents.

Now, still contained in a corporeal body, the autistic techno-savant stands at the intersection of the phallogentric Humanist and the posthumanist egalitarian ideal and points to a blurring of gendered boundaries but also to the stubborn return to otherness as a key component of majoritarian male identity formation. Until the rhetorically constructed autistic techno-savant, the Other of history had been marginalized due in no small part to his physical difference from the majoritarian white male. Enkidu is described as "wild" and as a "herd animal." Jim is black, and as if to emphasize his non-whiteness, is dressed by Tom Sawyer as a sick "A-rab" dyed blue during one episode on the raft. Chingachgook is a "red man." Queequeg is cannibalistic, dark-skinned, and covered in "purplish-yellow tattoos." Always there has been the distancing from whiteness. Because the autistic is originally marginalized as disabled due to a perceived

neurological breakdown, it his mind rather than his skin or body that is subject to marginalization.

Perhaps the most pronounced binary confronted by the presence of the autistic savant is the chasm between the historic Other and the anthropocentric notion of Man as the apex of a global network of cultures. The autistic techno-savant bridges that divide by existing outside of politics, hegemony, and capitalism. Braidotti suggests that

The “death of Man,” announced by Foucault formalizes an epistemological and moral crisis that goes beyond binary oppositions and cuts across the different poles of the political spectrum. What is targeted is the implicit Humanism of Marxism, more specifically the humanistic arrogance of continuing to place Man at the centre of world history. (23)

Although Braidotti suggests that man, “at the centre of world history,” can and must succumb to a more rhizomatic notion of zoe-egalitarianism, in the unlikely event that majoritarian men in power will willingly relinquish that power, contrary to the self-preservative survival instinct and for some abstract greater good, the autistic techno-savant functions as a more realistic alternative to humanistic arrogance and as a means of bridging gaps between majoritarian Self and marginalized Other. The autistic is the fulcrum between Humanism’s binary conception of man and “posthumanism as a move beyond these lethal binaries” (37). Posthumanism necessitates the death of Man but the birth of the autistic techno-savant as Man 2.0, a more rational version of man, rigidly programmed perhaps and incapable of biological reproduction, but also incapable of denying agency to others based on race, gender, physiognomy, ability, or nationality. Since these discriminatory practices have been a *de facto* hallmark of white male hegemony in the history and literary traditions of the Global North, the presence of the autistic as portrayed represents a

transition from one type of hegemonic whiteness to another. The Adjunct Autists that I identify in Chapter 2 represent the first time in a lineage of marginalised Others that the Other threatens to replace the majoritarian subjective Self. Two epistemological movements, digital technocentrism and posthumanism, and two characteristics unique to the autistic Other, language and a bio-technical brain, make this usurpation possible. Having addressed the issue of the autistic techno-savant as an embodied manifestation of the anticipated techno-human singularity, I will now turn my attention to the role that language and voice play in the 21st century incarnated Other.

A recurring theme within the conversation of the Self-Other binary is the use of voice and the appropriation of language between the majoritarian and marginalized communities. Braidotti observes that “the great emancipatory movements of postmodernity are driven and fuelled by the resurgent ‘others’: the women’s rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements; the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity” (37). The formation of the Other is the difference between who is speaking and who is being spoken *about*. This is where a rhetorical analysis of the autistic techno-savant in portrayal is vital to understanding the character as something more than an eccentric cast-off drifting in and out of the literary and cinematic texts of the pop culture mainstream.

The autistic techno-savant stands unique among a history of Others and challenges certain established notions of whose voice is being heard from within the Self-Other dualism. Foucault invokes Nietzsche’s insistence that “it was not a matter of knowing what good and evil were in themselves, but of who was being designated, or rather *who was speaking* when one said Agathos to designate oneself and Deilos to designate others” (Foucault, *Order of Things* 333, orig. emphasis). To be sure, the neurotypical majoritarian Self is still the speaker in this scenario.

Before the autistic, however, there was never a chance that the language of the Other would overthrow the language of that majoritarian Self. Huck Finn might emulate Jim's morality but never his slang. Natty Bumppo might learn from Chingachgook the ways of the wilderness, but he will revert to the discourse of white society in the end. Kirk might learn self-control from Spock, but he will not adopt Spock's robotic patterns of speech, a formalistic, pedantic style common among the represented autistic savant and reflective of autistics being referred to, from earliest identifications and often mythically attributed to Hans Asperger, as "Little Professors." Sherlock Holmes' literalism is on display when he tells a little girl who is grieving the death of her grandfather that "People don't really go to heaven when they die. They're taken to a special room and burned" (2:1 "A Scandal in Belgravia"). The alpha male in these scenarios, despite what on the surface appears to be a Self-Other quid pro quo, refuses to relinquish his language of power. This is a line, as sacred as the sexual, that is rarely crossed. In a technocentric era, however, a new language is needed. With increasing frequency, the autistic techno-savant of popular culture has become owner, operator, and master of the language of computers and technology. Although the majoritarian will continue to protect his language, also with increasing frequency, the language of technology is becoming the language of power.

Although fictionalized and often exaggerated for narrative effect, this emphasis on the autistic's extreme facility for a type of non-communicative language has roots in living savants such as Kim Peek (upon whom "Rain Man" was based) whose eidetic memory enabled him to retain approximately 98% of everything he read. Similarly, Daniel Tammet, another autistic savant with impaired social skills, was able to learn the Icelandic language in one week. Temple Grandin, while limited in her ability to engage in neurotypical casual conversation, can speak the "language" of the animals she studies in her career as a designer of more efficient and

humanitarian cattle processing plants. John Elder Robison's uncanny and seemingly innate facility with engineering, sound waves, and electronic circuitry stands in stark contrast with the challenges he faces in forming and maintaining relationships or engaging in interpersonal communication. In *Community*, when he realizes that Abed has memorized all of Britta's personal information, Jeff admits that "I see your value now." Sheldon Cooper is the go-to person when the other scientists and engineers in the group are baffled. Spock prefers working with machine to working with humans as he finds their "illogic and foolish emotions a constant irritant" (3:7 "Day of the Dove"). The autistic techno-savant is fluent in the languages of systemising and technology while the majoritarian finds himself, for the first time, as the illiterate outsider looking in.

This manifestation of language as praxis is emphasized by bell hooks:

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shares a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge. If radical postmodernist thinking is to have a transformative impact, then a critical break with the notion of "authority" as "mastery over" must not simply be a rhetorical device. (2511)

The introduction of the autistic techno-savant into the modern mainstream both serves and reflects this transformative impact as something beyond a rhetorical device. Unbound by the neurotypical's "common language" or to the "master narratives" that have dictated a history of existential discourse, the autistic, unlike his predecessors, is poised to take over the conversation and to speak for himself and even, with his penchant for techno-speak, for his neurotypical counterpart.

Living autistics and autistic savants have followed in the path of their predecessor Others in finding ways to speak in their own voices. The genres of autobiography and memoir are replete with examples including Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day*, John Elder Robison's *Look Me in the Eye*, Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures*, Naoki Higashida's *The Reason I Jump*, Tito Mukhopadhyay's *The Mind Tree*, and Donna Williams' *Nobody Nowhere* to name just a few. Common to these titles is the idea of autism as a variation on rather than a deficit in commonly understood neurotypical means of communication. With specific sensory and calibrated point-of-view references to the internal, eccentric workings of the othered mind, such titles point to a conduit through which the autistic mind might be made accessible to a neurotypical audience. Bloggers such as Amanda Baggs and dozens of autism-advocacy sites have followed but have also built upon the rhetoric of disability to inject public consciousness with the idea, both clinical and fictionalized, of the autistic as possessing a unique voice. For the first time in the lineage of the Western Other, the language of power flows uphill.

Gayatri Spivak finds an inextricable link between the definition of the Other and the context of language: "Certain members of the Indian elite are of course native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the *voice* of the Other" (2118, my emphasis). The autistic techno-savant is a curious case in this regard since one cannot imagine him integrated as a "native informant" as described by colonial theorists such as Spivak here and elsewhere, famously, by colonial and post-colonial scholars such as Césaire, Fanon, Bhabha, and Said. Today's neurotypical has no interest in the voice of the autistic Other; rather, what fascinates is not what the autistic Other has to say but his inability to speak "normally" and how he processes information internally. Unlike Spivak's Other where "the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous," (2118, orig. emphasis) the autistic Other remains true to his

enigmatic self and resists incorporation, indoctrination, or inculcation into the majoritarian culture or into its normative language.

In discussing the adjacency of Europe to the othered Orient, Edward Said notes that the Orient “is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1866). In the same way, the othered autistic savant, on the threshold of moving from marginalized to integrated to indispensable, is bound in a reciprocal relationship with the majoritarian Self. The autistic child, characterized clinically by delayed language acquisition and production, becomes in portrayal, an autistic adult with robotic speech patterns, grammatical precision, an eidetic memory, a weak grasp of metaphor, and the need to incorporate the language of computers into his every day encounters. Simply put, the Humanist man created a new brand of technology. He then created in the autistic techno-savant a romanticized version of a real neurological condition to enable himself to communicate with that technology. He now finds himself facing irrelevance in a posthuman world where he is no longer needed as a colonial power or even as a postcolonial intermediary. By speaking for himself in a techno-language coveted by the majoritarian Self, the autistic Other is poised to be the first in a long line of marginalized Others to dominate the conversation.

Language is just one way that the autistic transitions the archetypal Other from a deficit to a surplus model. The autistic, by his presence and in portrayal, represents an existential challenge both to Humanist and posthumanist definitions of the human. While the autistic does appear to challenge notions of human subjectivity and of anthropocentrism, the opposite may well be the case; that is, the autistic as “more human than human” to invoke the Tyrell Corporation motto from Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. Because posthumanism threatens to define

the human as no longer the sole domain of the majoritarian male, then that male is compelled to shift strategies. He does this through rhetorical positioning that re-integrates and then apotheosizes the alienated alien. To maintain hegemony, the autistic techno-savant is exalted by pop culture producers as the new locus of whiteness and of maleness. The script is flipped with the autistic Other injected into popular consciousness as a more viable subjective Self as the five following TV and film examples illustrate:

In his eulogy for Spock in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, Kirk declares that “Of all the souls I have encountered, his was the most...*human*.” Just as the best compliment, however loaded and misguided, that Huck can give to Jim is that “I know’d he was white inside,” Kirk’s most earnest, but equally loaded and misguided, compliment is to emphasize what he considers to be Spock’s innate “humanity.”

In *Adam*, Beth realizes the backwardness of the neurotypical-disabled binarism: “My favorite children’s book is about a little prince who came to Earth from a distant asteroid. He meets a pilot whose plane has crashed in a desert. The little prince teaches the pilot many things but mainly about love. My father always told me I was like the little prince. But after I met Adam, I realized I was the pilot all along...” In this case, Beth, as subject, enters the narrative as the curious explorer; in the end, she has come to recognize that to alien eyes, *she* is the objectified Other.

In *Rain Man*, Charlie Babbitt (Tom Cruise) begins as the quintessentially capitalist uber-male. By the end, his initial and thorough dehumanization of his autistic brother has led to a dismantling of his own understanding of being human, which the viewer is left to assume will initiate his re-humanization in better, more inclusive, and less narcissistic and capitalist terms.

In multiple episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon refers to himself or is referred to by others as an alien. In “The Robotic Manipulation,” Sheldon boasts that he is “aware of the way humans usually reproduce which is messy, unsanitary and based on living next to [Penny] for three years, involves loud and unnecessary appeals to a deity.” In “The Prom Equivalency,” he points out that “I may be an alien, but I have urges.” And yet, he remains the indispensable pivot point around which the other characters, helplessly and often with resentment, but also with grudging respect, necessarily rotate. In *The Imitation Game*, Joan Clarke (Kiera Knightly) reminds autistic techno-savant Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch) that it was only by way of his inhuman approach that he was able to design the enigma machine that would enable the Allies to break the unbreakable Nazi code, “No one normal could have done that. Do you know, this morning...I was on a train that went through a city that wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for you. I bought a ticket from a man who would likely be dead if it wasn’t for you. I read up on my work... a whole field of scientific inquiry that only exists because of you...Now, if you wish you could have been normal... I can promise you I do not. The world is an infinitely better place precisely because you weren’t.”

In each of these cases, reflective of a technocentric era, “normal” has become the new disability with autism poised as the potentially new normal. The autism narratives interrogate and dismantle the concept of the soul as the singular domain of the white, able-bodied, heteronormative man. For men, the autistic represents a new way of being male. This new way has two branches: on the one hand, the autistic gives permission for neurotypical men to embrace even further the most stereotypically masculine (minus the sexual) elements of themselves, which risks, as Braidotti warns, reconfiguring masculinity in Humanist terms. On the other hand, the autistic may, precisely because sexuality is removed from the equation, point to a non-

gendered, techno rather than anthropocentric posthuman prototype.³⁴ Either way, the autistic is invariably constructed as a means for men to protect their masculinity while continuing to define the human in phallogentric terms.

The autistic techno-savant represents an ontological challenge to notions of subjectivity and to contemporary notions of a spectrum of masculinities. If Western concepts of hegemonic masculinity have traditionally been defined based on embodied subjectivity, social intersubjectivity, sexual prowess, and access to and control over political and economic power, then what does a male character who possesses none of these traits and who is defined based on asexuality and pure intellect represent for men in a technocentric era? In terms of the autistic himself, if being human is considered as relational, then does a heteronormative community risk denying subjectivity to the psychologically introverted and socially autonomous autistic? In such a case, according to Stuart Murray, “the presence of autistic persons thus constitutes a kind of scandal in a culture where the subject in search of self is virtually equated with what makes us human” (*Autism and Representation* 51). The autistic captures the popular imagination in part because he both aligns with the “extreme male brain theory” posited by Baron-Cohen and heralds what Rosi Braidotti optimistically refers to as the posthuman “decline of the primacy of man.” The autistic techno-savant occupies a place between harbinger of that decline and potential savior of man and of the human, although in Humanist terms. He leaves the neurotypical with a dilemma: either the autistic is not human, an untenable position that gestures alarmingly toward early 20th century eugenics movements, or else being human must be based on something other than and beyond an oppositional subject-object paradigm.

³⁴ In chapter 5, I will address the provocative question, “What happens to romance and sex in the autism model of masculinity?”

To begin to unpack this apparent paradox, it must be determined whether posthumanism allows for agency through a greater understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity, or whether the posthumanist movement reflects the potential for further marginalization, however accidental, through objectification of the autistic³⁵ as an autonomously closed-circuit of isolated otherness. Stuart Murray argues that

...posthumanism emerges from all this theorizing as a complex and contested space. For some, it is exciting and productive precisely because of its desire to move beyond and redefine the human, while for others this redefinition threatens exclusionary practices that will limit the real nature of human variation. A posthuman future is thus both amenable to disability but also carries the ability to destroy it; it is neurodiversity but also eugenics depending on which version one might subscribe to. (“Posthuman” 63)

The danger of those with autism being sacrificed on the altar of humanity is addressed in such cases as the *Alphas* episode “Rosetta Stone” (4:1) and Elizabeth Moon’s novel *Speed of Dark*, both of which deal with the existential dilemma of a hypothesized autism cure. Living autistics such as Temple Grandin, and many families of individuals affected by autism have, with increasing frequency and insistence, rejected the idea of an “autism cure,” if ever such a prospect were to arise. Stuart Murray cautions that “a posthuman conception of autism might involve languages and structures that are dangerous precisely because, in that move to a space beyond, the material links to the experience of a lived life, the day-to-day business of being autistic, could be lost” (“Posthuman” 55). There is, of course, a danger that represented autism might reflect negatively on the quotidian realities of living autistics, their families, and their communities. The tendency among disability narratives is to attempt to “humanize” the disabled with the unspoken

³⁵ and, by extension, to individuals affected by similar neurological or genetic conditions such as schizophrenia, Rett Syndrome, Angelman Syndrome, and Fragile-X

assumption that the disabled or otherwise non-normative lack something integral to being human, a position that immediately begins what will become an embedded system of performative marginalization. Portrayals of autism do not necessarily do the opposite: it is less that the autistic is dehumanized and more that he is super-humanized, itself a form of dehumanization and a dynamic with different but still problematic functions in the space between fictional and lived experiences. This apparent apotheosis of the autistic as more human than human is the metaphorical backhanded compliment embodied by the Noble Savant, the character I define and analyse in the following chapter.

A similar source of tension exists in Rosi Braidotti's imperfect posthuman vision of the "posthuman subject...as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity" and "based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality, and hence community building." The posthuman is referred to frequently in such idealized terms. Braidotti calls it "zoeism." In other contexts, the posthuman ideal might be denoted as "interconnected systems," "deterritorialization," "de-centralization," or "multiplicities." Colebrook, noting that "the humanities have been in crisis," (159) points to a "posthuman landscape in which there is one general dynamic system with animals, machines, and digital codes all woven to constitute a single ontology" (166). Where does that leave the agoraphobic, introverted autistic, the figure whose clinical diagnosis refers literally to one who is immersed not within society but nearly entirely within himself? The autistic not only resists being woven into neurotypical society; he actively and by his nature refuses to be. In his capacity as a posthuman Other, the autistic disrupts the progressional logic of the human-as-center to the posthuman as de-centered.

The autistic is the accidental embodiment of the posthuman dilemma. In portrayal, he challenges hierarchical notions of power. As a being immune from economic considerations and

causes, he challenges capitalism. Immune as well from social conditioning and religious inculcation, he challenges cultural performativity. As a super-abled being, he challenges ideas and constructions of deficit models of disability. As an asexual male, he challenges heteronormativity and the primacy of sex in adult social relations. As an embodiment of stereotypically masculine traits, he challenges, by way of his hypermasculinity, traditional conceptions of hegemonic maleness. More than being “more human than human” and “more white than white,” the autistic may also be more posthuman than posthuman. And yet, his status as Other persists, leaving him as a kind of meta-Other, not between but beyond human and posthuman Self-Other, Subject-Object, and culturally reinforced dualisms.

CONCLUSION – BEYOND ANOTHER OTHER, SUBJECTIVITY FROM CYBORG TO SAVANT

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that the represented autistic, especially the autistic techno-savant, functions in popular culture as a 2.0 model of the archetypal Other. The autistic techno-savant continues a trend of predominately white, male neurotypical protagonists needing a marginalised external figure to achieve a more complete sense of their own subjectivity. Like predecessor Others that took the form, in approximate historical order, of animal, racial, and mechanical, the autistic techno-savant provides something that the neurotypical lacks. In this case, that missing element is a sense of bio-connectedness to advanced digital technologies and to the networked information systems of the 21st century. Unlike his predecessors, the autistic techno-savant is ethnically white, fully “human” in the culturally-prescribed Humanist sense of the word, and poised to usurp the neurotypical’s place at the top of the cultural apex. Similarities to prior incarnations of the Other point to the possibility of the autistic as the embodiment of the posthuman ideal; dissimilarities point to the autistic as a

rhetorical means to further whiteness and masculinity as the templates for being human. Where the autistic ultimately lands is of utmost importance. Beyond disability and media studies, the rhetorical mechanisms at work in the construction and proliferation of the autistic techno-savant gesture, at times unsubtly, toward systems of exclusion and marginalisation disguised as neuro-inclusivity. The co-option of the autistic as a 21st century incarnation of the archetypal Other has the potential to reveal certain truths about the lived condition of autism but also has the power to reinforce stereotypes, and possibly, in the extreme, to dilute represented autism to the point of non-existence.

While serving as a fitting metaphor for a generalized idea of the posthuman, at least one of the questions I need to answer is whether the autistic savant in portrayal can serve as a new and sufficient model for posthuman subjectivity. For her part, Braidotti might be suspicious of such a prospect as she cites multiple examples of the posthuman subject as inheriting the same problems that have plagued Humanist man. Upon a more robust examination, however, I find that her articulation of a posthuman subjectivity seems in keeping with an evolving understanding of the autistic techno-savant as an epistemological Rosetta Stone that might facilitate Man's conception of himself in relation to technology by way of his techno-other. The autistic techno-savant satisfies the criteria of a re-imagined understanding of the neurotypical Self in an age of "profound transformations," (12) and he represents an efficacious model for "new schemes of thought" (12) and for what human beings might yet become after surrendering – voluntarily or through cultural evolution or through technological revolution – a predominately male stranglehold on humanity as the template against which every other form of life is defined. If "[s]ubjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour" and "Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart" (15) then the

autistic techno-savant is poised through his “binary logic” to unite these elements into a spectacularly rational posthumanistic Self. Up until now, the Other was equated with the inferior. The autistic presence, however, heralds a location in the progression of the Other toward an arrival at his own subjectivity. The autistic techno-savant, while pigeonholed as socially deficient and connoted as unempathetic, rigid, impassive, and a host of other pejoratives, resists, by way of his portrayed techno-superiority, the degree and intensity of marginalization experienced by his predecessors. The answer to “who and what we are actually in the process of becoming” happens at the exact point where posthumanism and autism converge.

Haraway and Braidotti bookend the conception of the postmodern Other. For her part, Haraway points out that

certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals — in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self...The self is the One who is not dominated, who knows that by the service of the other, the other is the one who holds the future... (Haraway 177)

Haraway makes a compelling point, although I do not agree that it is the “task” of the other “to mirror the self”; instead, the Other complements and confronts the Self and, at his most effective, perhaps mirrors some interior, unexamined aspect of the subjective Self. Still, although Haraway does not address the disabled in her litany of dominated Others and probably did not anticipate an autistic Other who rejects inculcation, her conclusion, situating the Other as “the one who holds the future,” remains at least as true for the autistic as it did for the cyborg. These dualisms, their role in the identification of the Self, and the notion of the Other as “the one who holds the future” are in keeping with the passing of the baton from cyborg to savant. The autistic savant in

portrayal is the logical heir to Haraway's metaphorical interpretation of the cyborg. Haraway sees in the cyborg "the awful apocalyptic telos of the 'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self, untied at last from all dependency, a man in space" (9). This was perhaps the case given the technology of the time and in the context of a critique of traditional feminism. But the advanced technology of the digital age has dislocated the human-machine unity and has necessitated a new, united ultimate Self. Gears have given way to gigabytes, and feminism has morphed into posthumanism as a vehicle for epistemological discourse and of the interrogation of anthropocentric givens. For Haraway in 1983, "[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (44). Today, that maze has been reimaged; the autistic techno-savant rather than the cyborg is the way out.

For Braidotti, the posthuman endgame is reflected in zoe-centered egalitarianism. The autistic is a legitimate, practical vessel for Braidotti's more theoretical proposition. Beyond previous claims by other groups to a neo-humanist subjectivity, the autistic techno-savant exists in the same space as an apparently viable model for Braidotti's proposed posthuman simultaneously and as its despoiler. In Braidotti's progression of "becoming-animal, becoming-earth, and becoming-machine" (66), the autistic savant claims subjectivity through the next step of "becoming-technology" where his Otherness becomes supplemental rather than oppositional, advantageous rather than prohibitive. With biological access to a digital world of unlimited information, the autistic savant is a validation rather than a revenge of the nerds and an Other whom the neurotypical can and must look to as a means of coming to terms with his own subjectivity. For ethnic minorities, the disabled, women, and a host of historically marginalized groups, the autistic is, if not a saviour, then an Other who finally outstrips his otherness in an

existential coup that might at last see the heteronormative white male, the perceived oppressor, forced to re-examine and to redefine humanity on terms other than his own.

The autistic in popular culture fills a need. The neurotypical is in a state of flux between humanism and posthumanism and is primed to usher in a new episteme. It is within this time of transition that the autistic moors the neurotypical in a technocentric world. The autistic provides all the requisite characteristics in a long line of historical Others. He remains marginalized by a white, heteronormative, able-bodied template of hegemonic power. It is a slight of hand that disabilities scholar Jay Dolmage articulates as “The excessiveness and Otherness of the disabled body [that allows] for the construction of a mythical norm. It is only against an Othered body that the normal body is allowed to perpetuate its deceit (of transparency, of being standard, of being whole)” (94). The autistic techno-savant threatens to rewrite that mythical norm and to reveal the deceit inherent in the construction of the Other.

The autistic’s physiognomy, the “Apple aesthetic” referenced in the previous chapter, reflects his role outside of this “deceit” perpetuated by ableist, neurotypical human culture. Enkidu resembles an animal. Jim is black (and the “sick A-rab died blue”). Chingachgook is red and “horrid with paint.” Queequeg is a monstrosly tattooed Polynesian. The autistic, the human embodiment of the sleek design of modern technology, is almost always portrayed as taller, paler, slimmer, and whiter than his neurotypical partner. He exists in a partnership with the neurotypical alpha male to the exclusion of women. He is the reconciler of the neurotypical’s guilt. The autistic now bears the responsibility for “breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other” (Foucault xvi). After the death of Man, the autistic techno-savant might

yet become the posthuman poster child, the ideal steward of the earth, and the first Other to supplant the neurotypical and to claim the title of the normalized, ultimate, autonomously-created Self. Free from the culturally iterative restraints of sex, “mitsein” interdependence, commerce, gendered identity, social mores, and perhaps, ultimately of the original prosthesis of the phenomenological body, the autistic becomes a liberating template for how man and his attendant masculinities might survive the creeping incursion of posthuman ontology.

CHAPTER 4: The Neurotypical-Autistic Partnership – Isn't it Bromantic?

ARGUMENT – AUTISM AND MODELS OF MALE LOVE

In this chapter, I will argue that the archetype of homoerotic or “bromantic” love performs a unique cultural purpose in cinematic portrayals of an alpha male neurotypical protagonist coupled with an autistic techno-savant. Male TV and film couples such as Kirk and Spock (*Star Trek*), Troy and Abed (*Community*), Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper (*The Big Bang Theory*), and John Watson and Sherlock Holmes (*Sherlock*), among other neurotypical-autistic pairings, reflect contemporary male anxieties, allow for otherwise culturally-proscribed expressions of love between men, and serve as a rhetorical blueprint for masculinity in a digital age.

Building upon the work of literary critic Leslie Fiedler, including his books *Freaks* (1978) and *Tyranny of the Normal* (1996) and with special attention to his controversial essay “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in Huck, Honey!” (1948), I will attempt to demonstrate that the autistic techno-savant and the bromance function as interdependent rhetorical tools that enable deft circumvention of certain sexual taboos. While portrayed heteronormative relationships throughout popular culture tend to position love between a man and woman as a surface construct struggling to withstand submerged tensions, repressions, neuroses, denials, legal enjoinders, social expectations, and cultural impositions, Fiedler flips the script and identifies the much more compelling case of homoerotic partnerships with cultural taboos on the surface and with “chaste male love” (“Raft” 28) at its core. With his uncanny insights regarding the archetypal function of the marginalised Other, the unresolved anxiety of the culturally normative

prototype, and the eroticism of exclusively male literary encounters, Fiedler represents a uniquely relevant resource for this branch of my analysis of the portrayed autistic.

With both the cinematic bromance (DeAgnelis) and the portrayed, predominately white male autistic trending on an upward trajectory in popular culture representation (Williams, J.G.), it is natural that these two phenomena, as social realities and as cultural constructs, might converge. Fiedler does the preliminary archeological work of uncovering a pervasive but overlooked homoeroticism rooted in Western concepts of masculinity. In doing so, he provides the language and the historical context necessary for putting the two phenomena of autism and the bromance into conversation. My purpose in this chapter will be to re-calibrate and to advance that conversation in the context of a 21st century era of digital technologies and notions of multiple masculinities in search of a unifying definition.

Fiedler's observations about the unsubtle but overlooked archetype of interracial male pairings as articulated in "Come Back to the Raft..." align with a homoerotic dynamic that I have identified in the cinematic neurotypical-autistic partnership. The elements of male homoerotic love, female exclusion, and interraciality that Fiedler unearths in the 19th century American literary canon have a modern analog in popular visual rhetorical representations of autism spectrum disorders. The elements of masculinity, male bonding, misogyny, and the love-hate nature of miscegenation that Fiedler examines in the 19th century American literary unions of Jim and Huck (*Huckleberry Finn*), Ishmael and Queequeg (*Moby Dick*), and Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook (*The Leatherstocking Tales*) are alive and active in the contemporary neurotypical-autistic pairings listed above.

Of the four major sub-genres of autistics in portrayal as I define them in Chapter Two, this chapter will deal exclusively with Adjunct Autists. These are occurrences where the autistic

figure meets certain taxonomic criteria. In nearly all cases within this sub-genre, the autistic figure is white, male, tall, effeminate, virginal or sexually naïve, symmetrical, physically attractive by Western cultural standards, emotionally aloof, a techno-savant, and paired with a heteronormative, neurotypical male. It is within this group that the adult male relationships identified above are most manifest, and it is from this group that my argument for a cultural agenda through rhetorical representation finds its strongest testimony. Due to the pillars of homoeroticism that underpin the bromance, Extant Autists (e.g. Temple Grandin, Stephen Wiltshire, Daniel Tammet, Kim Peek) and Postulated Autistic Savants (e.g. Nikola Tesla, Alan Turing, Andy Warhol, Bobby Fischer) are excluded since individuals from these groups generally operate in isolation or else already openly self-identify as asexual or homosexual. Similarly, Autarchic Adolescent Autists, due to their solitary nature and age, do not invite critical examinations of the veiled homoeroticism of the bromance that serves as a vehicle for passionate male encounters. The Adjunct Autist sub-genre, on the other hand, offers a wealth of characters, themes, and visual rhetorical mechanisms that facilitate the transition from Fiedler's 19th century texts to the pop culture texts of the 20th and 21st centuries.

In nearly all pop cultural cases to be considered, although sex remains an integral part of the alpha male experience, the autistic techno-savant enables the white heteronormative male character the chance to experience a pure form of *emotional* love. Via the neurotypical-autistic bromance, the neurotypical man can attempt to reconcile his guilt over his systematic othering of marginalized groups, the disabled in this case, and can experience love without compromise to his alpha maleness. I will deal more specifically in the next chapter with the telos of sex, sexuality, and heteronormativity in portrayals of autistic characters. In this chapter, however, I will investigate the “last believed-in stronghold of love without passion” (“Raft” 27) in non-

sexual, homoerotic relationships between alpha male protagonists and the male autistic technosavants who complete this 21st century bromantic pairing.

Building upon the rhetorical function of the autistic Other as articulated in the previous chapter, I will argue further that such pairings are motivated by five cultural forces that I have identified as follows: normative male insecurities over constantly fluctuating codes of masculinity in what threatens to be a post-phallocentric era, neurotypical anxieties concerning the ascension of artificial intelligence, ableist guilt over the marginalization of the disabled, white fear of declining ethnic supremacy, and that such pairings, finally, serve as the newest outlet for the prerequisite female exclusion that enables homoerotic expressions of male love. These five core ingredients of masculinity, digital technology, disability, race, and love, while a daunting spectrum of cultural constructs, are conveniently packaged (Fiedler refers to the relationship as “condensed”) in representation as the neurotypical-autistic bromance.

So why are neurotypical adult males so often coupled with Adjunct Autists? In what ways does the presence of the autistic character, in conjunction with a heteronormative alpha male, provide an outlet for an otherwise forbidden expression of homoerotic love? Why has the white autistic replaced the predecessor non-white Other? And why now? It is within the visual rhetorical mechanisms of the bromance, I will argue, that the answers to some of Western man’s most pressing existential questions can be found.

To advance my argument, I first establish a theoretical foundation in the critical approach outlined by Fiedler. The archetypes of homoerotic love that Fiedler addresses in his essay predict the same elements of male love, misogyny, and majoritarian anxiety that I have discovered in the neurotypical-autistic bromantic pairings found throughout popular culture today. There is significance, I will argue, in the resilience of the bromantic archetype and in the presence,

specifically, of the autistic techno-savant as one half of this homoerotic pairing. In the past, while various types of male characters with their attendant variations of masculinity have assumed the role of bromantic partner to a heteronormative, neurotypical alpha male, there is significance in the rhetorical function of the autistic figure who has now, with increasing frequency, come to occupy that role.

The partnered Other, conventionally referred to as a “Noble Savage,” has morphed in time along with advances in digital technologies to perform a varied but parallel function. Expanding upon the previous chapter, I will show how the archetypal Noble Savage has moved out of the natural world, or what Fiedler refers to as “Nature undefiled – this is the inevitable setting of the Sacred Marriage of males” (“Raft” 31) and into the worlds of academia, science, forensics, and outer space. In the 21st century, that sacred marriage has relocated into mainstream society where the Noble Savage has been replaced by the Adjunct Autist. The Adjunct Autist now functions as a stock character that I have dubbed a “Noble Savant.” The Noble Savant completes a new bromantic pairing in a way that the archetypal Noble Savage is no longer able. The Noble Savant inherits some rhetorical function from the Noble Savage predecessor but also diverges in several important ways. I will conclude by making the case for this new bromance as a rhetorical means for reconciling homoerotic love and postmodern masculinity in a technocentric era of advanced digital technologies where brains supersede brawn. The neurotypical-autistic bromance does not simply reflect shifting trends in masculinity; it is a rhetorically-constructed set of instructions for how to be a man who can experience and express love in a world that increasingly challenges hegemonic notions of masculinity and heteronormativity.

INNOCENT HOMOSEXUALITY: A FIEDLER FIELD GUIDE TO THE BROMANCE

Because his theory of hidden homoeroticism in the American literary canon serves as a pillar of my argument in favour of a reconfigured 21st century version of the bromance, familiarity with Leslie Fiedler is essential. In “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in Huck Honey!” Fiedler, a maverick literary critic and scandalous voice of the Sixties counter-culture, provides a context and direction for my argument in favour of the autistic techno-savant as a new gateway for the intimate and often subconscious but remarkable connections between the sexually permissible and the forbidden for the Western male. In his essay, Fiedler postulates a latent love between black and white, settler and native, and cultural and natural underneath the fear and revulsion that exist as vitiating societal constructs on the surface of those intimate but chaste dichotomous relationships between men:

Mr. Fiedler argued that American culture during the frontier era had been dominated by the male quest to flee what Washington Irving dubbed “petticoat government...” But Mr. Fiedler also pointed to the recurrent motif of white heroes forming extremely close emotional bonds with men of other races. While European novelists of the 19th century wrote about the problems surrounding heterosexual love, argued Mr. Fiedler, classic American literature projected a fantasy of interracial harmony in a world without women – “innocent homosexuality,” as he put it. (McLemee)

These 19th century American literary themes of escaping from socio-politically empowered women, forming “close bonds with men of other races,” and entering into fantasies of “interracial harmony in a world without women” have an analog in today’s portrayal of autism in the form of the Adjunct Autist techno-savants.

I have identified a nearly identical dynamic in the relationship between a neurotypical, alpha male protagonist and an autistic techno-savant as portrayed in television and film. Male couples such as Kirk and Spock, Troy and Abed, Leonard and Sheldon, and Watson and Sherlock Holmes have become stock pairings whose homosocial relationship dynamic can be found manifest throughout popular culture. Their ascent in popular consciousness recalls Fiedler's observation of "the recurrent motif of white heroes forming extremely close emotional bonds with men of other races." In the 21st century bromantic construction, "other races" is being replaced by the "otherly abled." The neurotypical-autistic bromance is the 21st century incarnation of the American literary "projected fantasy" and is the new manifestation of "innocent sexuality."

While Fiedler's observations remain relevant, I must first align four important considerations unaddressed by Fiedler in his time. The first is the growing presence of a posthumanist, post-phallocentric ontology as the contemporary version of the "petticoat government" from which men now seek escape. For Fiedler, men feared and fled from the growing socio-political influence of women leading to what sociologist Michael Kimmel refers to as "the flight from the feminine" ("Masculinity" 77). The presence of the autistic techno-savant encompasses this male anxiety but also adds an element of emasculation as men perceive, not simply the intrusion of women into the political realm, but equal rights and posthuman egalitarian movements as portending the eradication of long-standing notions of masculinity itself. The second variable is the distinct switch from "men of other races" to white male autistics in the bromantic pairing. For Fiedler, the paired Other was universally non-white. The autistic, on the other hand, is portrayed nearly universally as ethnically white. He is, in fact, *exceptionally* white, both ethnically and in terms of his characteristic pale pallor as I describe in Chapter 2. The

third variable is the autistic as a partnered Other who outlives and potentially usurps the neurotypical protagonist. As Fiedler observes, the partnered Other of the literary canon always suffers, disappears, or dies:

Dana's Hope is shown dying of the white man's syphilis; Queequeg is portrayed as racked by fever, a pointless episode except in light of this necessity; Crane's Negro is disfigured to the point of monstrosity; Cooper's Indian smolders to a hopeless old age conscious of the imminent disappearance of his race; Jim is shown loaded down with chains... ("Raft" 33)

The literary bromances referenced by Fiedler may result in some sort of symbolic spiritual reconciliation (for example, Ishmael buoyed by Queequeg's coffin), but the partnership itself invariably ends, most often with the death of the non-white Other. The portrayed autistic, however, tends to stay wedded to his neurotypical partner. For the fourth variable, the end-game has morphed, contrary to Fiedler's postulation, from "a fantasy of interracial harmony" to a fantasy of techno-masculinity and of white male hegemony. The autistic techno-savant, more overtly and more ominously than his Othered predecessor, embodies an assertion of whiteness as a key component in the template for what it means to be human.

Although I have identified and will account for these four important variables, Fiedler's larger point remains intact regarding the bromance as a Rosetta Stone for discerning the core of love that exists beneath the racism, sexism, ableism, and other systems of marginalization that white males have undertaken historically in the struggle for identity formation. Although the term "bromance" was unavailable to Fiedler at the time of his essay, he still identifies all the component parts of the male partnerships that are ultimately expressions of homoerotic love.

Alan Golub, professor of American Studies at California State University at Fullerton, summarizes Fiedler's revolutionary exploration of this early but unnamed expression of what is today known as "bromantic" love:

I imagine that literary critic Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003) would approve of this development [the addition of the term "bromance" to the OED], whispering "I told you so" from beyond the grave. Fiedler rocked the literary world with his 1948 *Partisan Review* essay, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!" in which he pointed out that a dominant archetype in American literature is the homoerotic love affair between two men who light out for the territory to escape civilization's responsibilities and constrictions (and its women). Moreover, as Fiedler observed—even more controversially—these bromantic pairings tend to involve a young white man and a man of color. (Golub)

Fiedler's observation of an innocent and asexual consort between the heroic pairings of Huck and Jim, Ishmael and Queequeg, and Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook from the so-called "boys' books" of 19th century American literature make him arguably the first bromantic.

The homoeroticism between the white protagonist and his partnered Other sets the stage for what I will illustrate is a continuation of the homoerotic theme in neurological rather than in racialised terms. According to Fiedler, for the partnered males, there "lies between the lovers no naked sword but a childlike ignorance, as if the possibility of a fall to the carnal had not yet been discovered" ("Raft 29). The "naked sword" appears as a phallic reminder in the form of Jim's nakedness on the raft, Queequeg's "ritual touching of foreheads" ("Raft" 29) with Ishmael in their first encounter, and Chingachgook's alias as "Le Gros Serpent." Fiedler himself sounds both surprised and impressed that such an obvious motif could have been so deftly and nearly

imperceptibly woven into the fabric of some of the most beloved boys' books from the literary canon: "I find the complex we have been examining genuinely mythic; certainly, it has the invisible character of the true archetype, eluding the wary pounce of Howells or Mrs. Twain who excised from *Huckleberry Finn* the cussing as unfit for children, but who left, unperceived, a conventionally abhorrent doctrine of ideal love" ("Raft" 30). Although he did not necessarily anticipate the arrival and eventual prominence of the autistic in popular culture, Fiedler paves the way for a doctrine, not simply of ideal love, but of a type of postmodern love. What happens to masculine love in a digitally-defined technocentric world? The answer lies in rhetorical representations of the partnered adult autistic.

That Fiedler discovers latent elements of homoerotic love in "boys' books" is significant in the application of autism to the archetypal composition of hidden homoeroticism. For Fiedler, "mythic America is boyhood" ("Raft" 27). For Cooper, it was "the childish, impossible dream" ("Raft" 30). For D. H. Lawrence, it was "clearly the boys' Utopia" ("Raft" 30). In keeping with this theme, my argument centers on maleness, and maleness begins with boys. Although he does not appear in "boys' books," per se,³⁶ the partnered autistic techno-savant, like his literary predecessors, performs the function of the specifically "boy" companion to the neurotypical partner. In *Adam*, Beth shouts, "You're a child, Adam!" When not conducting physics research, Sheldon Cooper splits his time between video games and comic books. Abed is obsessed with building the ultimate blanket fort. In the 2009 *Star Trek* re-boot, Sarek tells Spock that Spock will "always be a child of two worlds." Sherlock Holmes complains to John Watson that "You're hardly going to need me around now that you have a *real* baby on the way" (*Sherlock* 3:2: "The Sign of Three"). For autism and culture columnist Brian Bethune, at least part of the portrayed

³⁶ That role is filled by the Autarchic Adolescent Autist as defined in Chapter 2.

autistic's function is to "...point at (and point out) social hypocrisies, as though they [the autistics] were large – and exceptionally intelligent – children" (Bethune 5). This stands to reason as one of the functions of the autistic in the neurotypical-autistic bromance, as in the partnerships identified by Fiedler, is to help the neurotypical to navigate the path from boyhood to manhood. I must point out, however, that the goal is never "manhood" as defined by existing cultural practices and gender expectations; rather, the bromantic path leads to a reconfigured and arguably more posthuman type of man, one who is in touch with his universally-connected self and liberated from an iterative history of cultural performativity.

As in Fiedler, this path from boy to man is fraught with emasculating women, family expectations, increasing obligatory domesticity, religious inculcations, societal restraints, white guilt, and other cultural constructs that boys must escape so that they can experience "chaste male love as the ultimate emotional experience" ("Raft" 28). For Fiedler, this path toward chaste male love ends with the death or disappearance of the othered partner. However, I see the modern version of the bromance as a more stable and lasting construct. By himself, the autistic character brings together adult ideals of hyper-intellect with the nostalgia of boyish naiveté. Coupled with a neurotypical, alpha male protagonist, the autistic functions as a rhetorical compromise between the responsibilities of adulthood and the freedom of childhood.

The autistic as a man-boy sidekick is just one of many ways that the bromantic dynamic has remained consistent at its core while shifting at its surface over time as cultural realities, such as the rise of autism in fact and in popular perception, mandate. As in Fiedler, the homoerotic relationship represents a challenge to entrenched cultural taboos. It is an expression of male love uncomplicated by sex. It is an attempt by the white majoritarian male to recapture a repressed part of his culturally-constrained humanity. Also, as in Fiedler, the partnership is a symbolic

marriage between the white majoritarian male and the historical victim, in this case, a representative of neurological disability, of his imperial oppression. The protagonist in Fiedler's bromantic pairings under consideration was typically a white male, often on the fringes of society; the sidekick was a marginalized "noble savage" or some form of "dark" or ethnic other who possessed an uncontaminated morality, an enviable degree of spirituality, or an uncanny understanding of the natural world. Only together, removed from the company of women, from the confines of civilization, and from Puritanical taboos against homosexuality and the miscegenistic "mingling of blood" ("Raft" 31) could the couple experience and express a form of forbidden but pure love. To perform this rhetorical function, the protagonist's partner must be an adult autistic techno-savant. Neither Autarchic Adolescent Autists such as YA characters Christopher Boone, Colin Fischer, or Nathaniel Clark, nor a neurotypical child prodigy will do. Only the Adjunct Autist possesses the traits necessary to function in the 21st century as the ethnic minority functioned in the 19th and 20th centuries. As he looks for pure love in an era of multiple masculinities, technocentrism, and female empowerment, the white male protagonist latches onto a new partner, one anticipated by Fiedler in all but name.

Only the Adjunct Autist enables extremes of boyishness (e.g. naiveté, social awkwardness, obsessive special interest, narcissism, petulance) and extremes of intellect (e.g. hyper-systemization, prodigious skills in math and science, reliance on logic). This combination of marginalized extremes is a carry-over from Fiedler's observations in "Come Back to the Raft..." where Fiedler posits the inevitable thematic interconnectedness in the extreme portrayals of the Negro and the homosexual: "In the earlier minstrel show, a Negro performer was required to put on with grease paint and burn cork the formalized mask of blackness; while the queer must exaggerate flounce and flutter into the convention of his condition" ("Raft" 26). The racial and

sexual “exaggerations, flounces, and flutters” referenced by Fiedler manifest in the postmodern technological world as an emphasis and ultimately a reliance on savantism, the ability of a human being to be most like a computer, the rare but often referenced characteristic of the autistic. The Negro must be blacker than black; the homosexual, queerer than queer. And, correspondingly, the neurotypical’s partner must be more than clinically autistic. In the 21st century bromance, he must be a techno-savant.

In this way, the autistic techno-savant continues the archetype where Fiedler leaves off. This new companion has transformed in parallel with technology to the point where he has become a “light” rather than “dark” other and a source of intellect rather than of conscience while remaining gender neutral and increasingly a personification of digital technology. Certain characteristics remain consistent with Fiedler’s identified bromantic prototype. The autistic, like Jim, Queequeg, and Chingachgook, begins as a feared, marginalized, and misunderstood figure. Like his predecessors, the autistic is alone but not lonely. He provides the white male with companionship and at least partial access to a realm outside of Western cultural constraints. His ways are strange but compelling, and he presents a constant dilemma to the neurotypical alpha male: either convert the autistic to neurotypically normative ways or else “go native” and join the autistic outside of neurotypical culture. In Fiedler, that final dilemma is circumvented by the death of the partnered Other. Today, the dilemma is reconciled in the stability and longevity of the neurotypical-autistic bromance. In Fiedler, the majoritarian Self-Other partnership is temporary. Jim disappears. Chingachgook is the last of the Mohicans. Queequeg dies. The neurotypical-autistic bromance, on the other hand, has become a fixture. Even Spock’s death cannot stand, and the character is brought back to life in *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock*, a necessary narrative contrivance to keep the Kirk-Spock bromance alive. The path outlined by

Fiedler no longer needs to end. Instead, the modern bromance alternates between the path of boyhood and the path of manhood. It is in between these two paths that the autistic-neurotypical bromance finds a home.

However, it is important for me to point out that this is not simply a matter of finding a home for the autistic figure, nor is it a surface comparison between genres or an observation of a 21st century “update” to a 19th century literary phenomenon; the identification of this particular variant of the autistic pop culture figure is, instead, a gateway to a better, more comprehensive way of identifying shifting paradigms of masculinity in a digital age. In a postmodern world of artificial intelligence and big data, characters such as Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock Holmes represent a new type of partner for the hero and at least one new anxiety-producing social taboo – the mixing of man and digital technology – to overcome. The transitioning cultural understanding of and representation of masculinity as embodied by these sample characters speaks volumes about the ways that such portrayals affect popular understandings of autism and the ways they may reflect a changing relationship for man both with technology and with the possibility of greater hybridization between human beings and the computer as represented here by the autistic techno-savant. Fiedler’s theories as expounded in “Come Back to the Raft...” aid in an exploration of what is a permutation in the bromantic relationship from Fiedler’s 19th century literary examples of the marginalized white male paired with a “dark other” to the go-it-alone alpha male of the Schwarzenegger/Stallone era to the modern pop culture phenomenon of the alpha male being paired with an autistic techno-savant.

Historically, the alpha male transitions from needing a heart (as represented by the moral compass of conscience provided by the ethnic other) to needing nothing (his lone-wolf alpha maleness makes him complete) to needing a brain (as represented by the autistic savant). In

parallel, the literary and cinematic protagonist has shifted from pairing with a Noble Savage on a quest to be one with the natural world (where the Savage represents an integration of man with nature) to being one with mechanism (where the Savage represents an integration of man with rudimentary machine in the form of the cyborg) to being one with technology (where the Savage, now a “Noble Savant,” represents what is essentially a human CPU). The following table illustrates the bromantic trajectory:

BROMANCE TRAJECTORY TABLE							
Bromantic Partner to White Male Protagonist	Form	Physiognomy	Example	Time Period	White need that is being fulfilled	Location for Homoerotic Encounters	Telos
1. Animal	Man-beast	Male, Hairy, Bestial, Hunched, Semi-human	Enkidu	18 th century B.C.E.	Connectedness with nature	Nature, Countryside	Partner dies
2. Ethnic	Adult non-white male	Male, Adult, Black, Native, Asian, Tall, Ethnically dark	Jim, Queequeg, Chingachgook	19 th century	Forgiveness, alleviation of guilt for racist, colonial, imperial practices	River, Sea, Forest	Partner dies or disappears
3. No Partner	Lone-wolf hero	Male, Adult, White, Mesomorphic	Rambo (<i>First Blood</i>), John Matrix (<i>Commando</i>), Frank Dux (<i>Bloodsport</i>)	20 th century	Autonomy, retributive violence, extreme physical masculinity	Jungle, Criminal underworld	Hero is vindicated, remains alone
4. Machine	Cyborg	Male, Adult, White, Dis/Super-abled	Six Million Dollar Man, Terminator, Replicants	20 th century	Physical improvement via prosthetic	Post-apocalypse	No partner; machine
5. Autistic Techno-savant	Scientist, Savant	Male, Adult, White, Tall, Slender, Attractive, “Apple Aesthetic”	Spock, Sheldon, Abed, Sherlock	21 st century	Connection to digital technologies / digital access to portals of power	Universities, Urban centres, Hospitals, Research facilities, Detective labs	Partners remain coupled

Figure 7 – Trajectory and Evolutionary Characteristics of the Literary Historical Bromance

By reverse engineering the neurotypical’s partner, whether that partner assumes the form of animal, ethnic minority, machine, or personified digital technology, I can reveal the rhetorical mechanisms at work. These mechanisms are road signs pointing to what the neurotypical feels he is missing what he believes he needs to feel complete.

Fiedler's lifelong commitment to studying the alien, the freak, and the cultural "other" makes him an appropriate voice to invoke in my analysis of this particular function of the autistic techno-savant in popular culture. Working backwards toward Fiedler with the autistic as a modern stand-in for Jim, Queequeg, or Chingachgook, I have identified a parallel with and permutation of Fiedler's concept of the simultaneous fear of and love for that "other." The dynamic exists in the contemporary cinematic bromance where the fear of homosexuality and the desire of men to be partnered with another man occupy the same space. In the same way, the cultural fear of autism has come to occupy the same space as the attraction to it; that is, the desire to possess the powers of Rain Man are coupled with the fear of the price the handful of "Rain Mans" of the world must apparently pay for their extraordinary gifts. Within the cinematic texts under consideration here, man wants the powers but not the deficits of Rain Man. Man wants dominion over access points to the unlimited information of global digital networks that blanket the world. Man wants to know what it means to be "masculine" in the 21st century age of universal civil rights, human equality, and fluctuating gender identities. And man wants to experience love without the restrictions of culture or the complications of women. These disguised desires can be seen in rhetorical constructions of neurotypical-autistic partners. Fiedler provides an unobstructed lens through which to look.

NOBLE SAVAGE TO NOBLE SAVANT (FROM SEA TO CIRCUIT-BOARD)

In further advancing my argument, I need to illustrate, not only that the Noble Savage archetype has become reconfigured, but how such a transformation happened, in what ways it tracks with parallel transformations in relationships between man and advanced technologies,

and why the autistic figure functions as a most fitting prototype for a reconfigured, 21st century version of the archetype. The common denominator between the Noble Savage and the Noble Savant is the character's bromantic engagement with a neurotypical, heteronormative character who operates as a default standard-bearer for Western conceptions of alpha maleness.

Leading up to the bromantic encounter, Fiedler finds the white alpha male in a state of imbalance, caught up on a "conflict of principle and practice" ("Raft" 26). In this state, Humanist ethics do not always align with the realities of imperialism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other instances of imposed ethnic and gendered hegemonic enterprises. In this sense, the white man as identified by Fiedler, is plagued by an internal contradiction. In his search for balance, resolution, or reconciliation, the heteronormative, neurotypical protagonist finds the Noble Savage, represented in Fiedler by Jim, Queequeg, and Chingachgook. This figure is the vehicle used by the white protagonist to personify his spiritual imbalance and to provide a means for how he might reconcile his own internal, culturally manufactured contradictions. With advances in civil, ethnic, gender, and women's rights and among other empowerment movements of the 20th century, the Noble Savage was no longer an appropriate or helpful figure in achieving this reconciliation. In a technocentric era, the Noble Savage has been replaced by the Noble Savant, a convenient figure who functions in the 21st century the way the Noble Savage did in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Although Fiedler does not use the term "Noble Savage" in "Come Back to the Raft...", the archetypal Others he references are exemplars of this paradigm. The term "Noble Savage" has ambiguous origins. While Rousseau is often mistakenly credited with the term (he never used it himself), the concept is at least as old as Enkidu from the 18th century B.C.E. *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The idea of white, Eurocentric culture as existing artificially and unnaturally has

been addressed by Lucretius and Cicero and by Dryden who is most often credited with coining the term “Noble Savage” in his heroic play *Conquest of Granada* (1672). Despite the ranging definitions of the Noble Savage, its rhetorical function, remains uniform: The white majoritarian male is attracted to the Noble Savage while he simultaneously perceives the Noble Savage as a threat to his own normative subjectivity. He is attracted to the Noble Savage out of a sense of guilt and because the Noble Savage does not seem to need him. Meanwhile, the threat represented by the Noble Savage stems of the majoritarian male’s understanding, whether conscious or not, that the Eurocentric culture he inhabits is tainted with violence, hypocrisy, materialism, consumerism, and seemingly arbitrary cultural contrivances not apparent in the culture inhabited by the Noble Savage.

In the 21st century, because the white male can no longer claim ethics, morality, religion, or culture as his sole domain and since an ethnic minority can now be the protagonist with equal access to an awareness and practice of justice and conscience, the role of the Noble Savage needs to be replaced. Increasingly, that the role is filled by the Noble Savant. In each case of a neurotypical-autistic bromantic relationship, the autistic techno-savant inspires the neurotypical hero to re-examine identity in his world of ubiquitous and increasingly integrated technology. As fictional representatives of a historically marginalized and underrepresented segment of the population, the Noble Savant has entered popular consciousness as a glorified walking computer against whom a neurotypical population can define itself simultaneously by what it is not and by what it may yet become.

As observed by Fiedler, early literary examples typically find a white male protagonist entering a communion with a person of nature, a savage or some sort of “dark other,” who enables both the relationship and the protagonist to attain a more complete sense of his

subjective self. In the tradition of literature and, for purposes of my argument, of television and film, the archetypal Noble Savage pairings have included such classic duos as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and McMurphy and Chief to name a few. The characteristic physicality of the archetypal pairings matters, and, although it has undergone a transformation in the post-modern, computer era, the role, function, and symbolic representation of the othered partner remains strikingly consistent with Fiedler's description.

Historically, the Noble Savage has been the completion of a type of existential dualism. He has provided what the white protagonist, the man of society, cannot provide for himself; that is, a sense of the natural, of the universally moral, an elusive degree of harmony with Nature, and something primitive and primordial yet romantically perceived as wholesome and natural. When Ishmael needs to set out to sea to purge society from himself, he finds Queequeg's arm "thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife" (Melville, Ch. 4). When Huck needs a moral compass, he finds Jim who teaches him that "Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (Twain, Ch. 15). When Natty Bumppo needs the spiritual balance of Nature, he finds Chingachgook and learns that "There is reason in the Indian, though nature has made him with a red-skin" (Cooper, Ch. 3). In *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper establishes both Bumppo and Chingachgook as thoroughly dialogic characters. This dialogism is necessary to their survival on the frontier. University of Florida professor emeritus David Leverenz cites this dialogism as a key to the model Bumppo provides for the frontier hero: "Here is the new myth of American manhood in the making: to be civilized and savage in one composite, self-divided transformation" (qtd. in Clark 26). This tidy encapsulation touches upon the essence of the

relationship between the composite-divides of Self and Other, civilized and savage, white and black, and neurotypical and autistic. The autistic in popular representation functions as a new Other. Or, to put it in colloquial, pop culture terms, autism is the new black.

That the composite-divide relationship is described as a “myth” does not vitiate its influence in the worlds of fiction or its impact in the real world. Like rhetoric, myths are constructions made of moving parts that can be tracked to discern what work they do in the real world. The dialogism inherent in that mythic relationship has transformed in the 21st century from one of “civilized-savage” to “human-computer.” In either case, the intimacy without romance represents the essence of the male-male love that forms the foundation of the historical and the modern literary and cinematic bromance. The cultural transition from “savage” to “computer” as the sought after and missing element of the masculine self is the cornerstone of the transition from Noble Savage to Noble Savant.

As this transition illustrates *prima facia*, the Noble Savage is no longer an appropriate partner. The figure he represents now needs to provide a new ability the protagonist cannot: pure, logical computational power. And who better than the autistic savant to provide this talent? The autistic as a computer-human hybrid, although based only loosely on any clinical definition or on most real-life occurrences, permeates the cultural understanding of autism and inspires the popular imagination. Characters such as Rain Man and real-world autistic savants such as math and language prodigy Daniel Tammet, artistic prodigy Stephen Wiltshire, and computer prodigies like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg have usurped the idea of the Noble Savage in popular imagination. The rhetorical message is that the neurotypical protagonist has grown beyond the need for moral lessons from the outcast and marginalized men of nature. He has become, so conventional wisdom seems to suggest, post-racial and post-gender, and he has

learned the lessons of the forest, of the river, and of the sea. In a postmodern era of advanced technology, the Noble Savage has begun to develop into the Noble Savant, and the bromance has moved toward a more intellectual sense of connectedness within the confines of society as opposed to the corporeal homoerotic dynamic described by Fiedler in the escapist bromance.

The Noble Savant, like the Noble Savage, is simultaneously a character of derision and of admiration. The white majoritarian resents and covets the Noble Savage's freedom from culturally-imposed constraints. He resents and covets his physical difference. He resents and covets his different language. (Even the derisory word "barbarian" has as its etymology, "One who does not speak Greek.") He resents and covets, simultaneously and without contradiction, both the Noble Savage's societal communality and his personal autonomy. He resents his religion and covets his spirituality. Most relevant to the bromance, he resents but desperately covets the Noble Savage's sexual freedom and his liberation from women. The Noble Savant, like the Noble Savage, embodies the exact projected resentments and attractions felt by the white majoritarian toward any Other who represents a reflection of his hypocrisies, of his historical brutalities, and who poses a potential threat to his existential self.

As so-called geek culture has further secured its place in the modern mainstream, the Noble Savage archetype has adjusted with the times and with the ubiquity of technology while adhering as strictly as ever to Fiedler's notions of chaste male love as the reconciler of culturally diametrical opposites of savage and civilized, of black and white, and now of human and technological. Although Fiedler's essay appears before the modern computer age and before the near-realization of artificial intelligence, the themes he identifies apply as much to the bromance between the neurotypical and the autistic savant in the technological world as they do to the bromance between the white and the black or the Indian in the 19th century. The parallels are as

striking as they are consistent: “Of the infantile, the homoerotic aspects of these stories we are, though vaguely, aware; but it is only with an effort that we can wake to a consciousness of how, among us who at the level of adulthood find a difference in color sufficient provocation for distrust and hatred, they celebrate, all of them, the mutual love a white man and a colored” (“Raft” 29). With the “colored” now replaced by the autistic, the rest of the equation remains unchanged. The homoerotic aspects of the bromance are perhaps inevitable; they are, after all, about love. For all his physical prowess and countless sexual conquests, Kirk will never love anyone more than he loves Spock; Troy will never love anyone more than he loves Abed; Leonard and Sheldon, with their relationship of love-hate bickering, belong together as if married. Robert Downey, Jr. who portrays Sherlock in the updated Guy Ritchie films (2009 and 2011) noted that Sherlock Holmes “may be a very butch homosexual” (Gloudeman n.p). In each case, there is the undercurrent of love. And in each case, the bromance enables that love, at least in its disguised form, to rise closer to the rhetorical surface.

THE INDISPENSIBLE AUTISTIC TECHNO SAVANT – A BROMANTIC NECESSITY

Having establish that a neurotypical-autistic bromance exists and that the Noble Savant has replaced the Noble Savage, I must resolve the next logical questions: Why the autistic techno-savant? What function does he serve that can no longer be served by the black, Native, or other non-white character? In answer, I will argue that the autistic techno-savant, as a culturally-produced and consumed product, has been manufactured to enable men to access a certain type of hegemonic hypermasculinity while experiencing and expressing love in a world where digital technology represents access to power. The neurotypical-autistic bromance relocates

opportunities for expressions of homoerotic love from the world of nature to the world of culture. This specific brand of bromance is essential; without it, men in a technocentric era could not tap into the element of homoerotic love that has been indispensable in the construction of masculinity, itself. Without this specific model of the archetypal bromance, male love could not survive. At its heart, the bromance, whether characterised by the Noble Savage or by the Noble Savant, is a means of bringing to the surface a dynamic of male love that has been long-submerged by Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian cultural and religious traditions. In the case of the autistic techno-savant, the bromance illustrates how a new type of hegemonic masculinity can survive in a technocentric and potentially post-phallogocentric era. In this section, I will argue that the neurotypical-autistic bromance allows for the most complete expressions of male love in an era where brains are the new brawn.

As a figure commonly identified as possessed of an aberrant, enigmatic, and stereotypically “male” brain, the autistic techno-savant allows for a degree of male intimacy that cannot be found in any other partner. Due to his social innocence and his emotion-free, unassailable reliance on logic, the autistic techno-savant enables the bromance to develop in parallel with a growing understanding of the intimate connection between the human world and the technological one. In the neurotypical-autistic bromance, the love-hate dynamic between technology and the human heart is reconciled when the embodiment of the technology that man has created and which he both fears and hopes he will become reassures him that, together, each is better off than either is alone. The neurotypical-autistic bromance is an attempt by men to connect to the disconnected, to temper passion with logic, and to imbue the mechanical with the emotional. While, for Fiedler, the connection was between black and white, for the modern bromance, it is between human and computer. Either way, Fiedler’s conclusion is equally valid:

“Behind the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended. It is a dream so sentimental, so outrageous, so desperate, that it redeems our concept of boyhood from nostalgia to tragedy” (“Raft” 33). For consumers of popular culture, the final redemption comes in the form of a reconciliation between the abled and the disabled, or, in the case of the autistic techno-savant, the “super abled.” The neurotypical-autistic bromance doubles as an access point where an enigmatic neurological condition can be packaged and understood beyond clinical definitions as something spectacular and superhuman, something to be admired rather than misunderstood or pitied.

Consequently, the more graphic and severe characteristics of autism – violent outbursts, delayed gross motor skills, toe-walking, and stimming (hand-flapping and other repetitive body movements) – are expunged or, at most, are rendered as mildly annoying eccentricities. Other diagnosable characteristics of autism such as a preference for solitude, difficulty understanding humour or sarcasm, guileless honesty, hyper-formalised speech patterns, perfectionism, hypersensitivity to external stimuli, and a general lack of empathy are common to Spock, Abed, Sheldon, Sherlock, and a host of other autistic techno-savants. The savantism, however, enables the autistic to fill a role beyond that of handicapped victim or of social cause célèbre. It is possible for an audience to feel, based on an often simplified and romanticized understanding of the autism spectrum, that it “understands” the condition. “Savant syndrome remains a ‘challenge to our capabilities,’ as one discussant described it in an American Psychiatric Association paper in 1964, concluding that the real significance of savant syndrome lies in our inability to explain it” (Horowitz, et. al. 1075). The autistic, like the ethnic minority, transitions from being a curiosity to being an object of fear to being an object of study to becoming, at last, a bromantic

life-mate. This is a version of attachment theory or what psychologist Dorothy Tennov famously dubbed “limerence,” or a type of emotional, obsessive dependency. The key component here is the desire for emotional reciprocity. The neurotypical obsession with techno-human hybridization is manifest in the neurotypical-autistic bromance. The bromance, in this case, is the personification of human-technological reciprocity; it is a way for the neurotypical to tap into an embodiment of superhuman processing power and to anthropomorphize the “personal” in the personal computer.

Only in his capacity as a human computer does the autistic make sense in popular perception. And it is to this rhetorical home base that the autistic techno-savant consistently returns: Kirk refers to Spock as a “splendid computer” (*Star Trek* 1:21: “Return of the Archons”). In *Community*, Jeff instructs Abed: “You’re a computer. Scan your mainframe for some juicy memories” (*Community* 2:21 “Paradigms of Human Memory”). In *Rain Man*, the Las Vegas casino security chief observes that Raymond is “not using a computer” without realizing as the audience does that the man he is watching essentially *is* a computer. Defending himself in a charades-like guessing game with Leonard, Howard, and Raj, Sheldon counters, “That’s preposterous. I do not resemble C-3PO. Don’t get me wrong, I’m flattered. I just don’t see it.” (*The Big Bang Theory* 2:21 “The Vegas Normalization”). Original “Sherlock Holmes” creator Arthur Conan Doyle “believed that Holmes did not have a romantic life, describing him as ‘inhuman as Babbage’s calculating machine’” (Hawksley). My point here is not simply to provide a litany of illustrations; rather, there is value in the identification of the social commentary embedded in these rhetorical constructions. While other neurological conditions and disabilities have relied upon prosthetics and technologies to provide a degree of “normalization,” the autistic techno-savant represents a viable, non-mediated analog to integral elements of a 21st

century, technocentric era and to the digital technologies that are increasingly interwoven into the fabric of human culture and even on and into the human body.

The juxtaposition of the neurotypical with the autistic techno-savant parallels a love-hate, interdependent relationship between the human and this increasingly interconnected world of digital technology. It is the autistic's ability to function as a computer that alienates him from and that endears him to the alpha male protagonist. As in the examples identified above, the neurotypical both derides and glorifies his autistic partner. Spock and Kirk spend as much time bickering as they do saving each other's lives. Troy and Abed's relationship begins as an antagonistic one before quickly becoming the central story arc of love in the series *Community*. Sheldon Cooper and Sherlock Holmes consistently irritate and befuddle their respective neurotypical partners, yet the partners remain connected by a bond reminiscent of the brotherly camaraderie of the battlefield or the ballpark. As in Fiedler, both elements, the attraction and the repulsion, are necessary for the bromance to function.

The repulsion half of the bromance appears in the othering of the autistic character. Prior to the autistic, the "other" in the bromantic pairing began as a man of nature, later became a man of machinery, and is now in the process of shifting, in parallel with a societal recognition of and fascination with autism and savantism, into a man (or, less frequently, a woman) of technology. This typically male-male partnership, both in its original and revised form, points to something deeper in the relationship between men, and, more central to my thesis, between a man and an embodied computer. At its core and unlike the antecedent bromance of "boys' books" and of the buddy cop genre, this new brand of bromance is representative of the Western world's cultural embrace of modern digital technology. This embrace is coupled with the nagging fear that the

final integration of human and computer³⁷ may represent a complete and irretrievable compromise to human subjectivity. The fact that the neurotypical and autistic dynamic manifests as a strictly homoerotic but nonsexual partnership reflects two mutually-exclusive notions: that the neurotypical's love of technology will necessitate being integrated with it and that the neurotypical's sense of self-preservation must prevent that integration from happening. It is in the territory between this push-pull dynamic that the autistic, and specifically the autistic techno-savant, displacing Fiedler's Negro, homosexual, and Indian, finds his place at the right hand of the neurotypical protagonist. As illustrated by the Kirk-Spock prototype, the neurotypical admires the autistic savant for his tunnel-visioned focus on and mastery of a specific field, for his rigid dedication to logic, for his immunity from human emotions, and for his resemblance to the advanced digital technology that permeates society. These are the exact characteristics commonly associated with masculinity and the "male brain." These are also the exact characteristics that enable the neurotypical to alienate, misunderstand, mock, mistrust, and even fear the autistic techno-savant.

Fiedler addresses the parallel dynamic in his major works including in *Return of the Vanishing American* where he notes that "[I]t seems to make no difference at all...everyone who thinks of himself as being in some sense an American feels the stirrings in him of a second soul, the soul of the Red Man" (*Vanishing* 12). It is at this critical turning point in his relationship with technology that the neurotypical finds himself growing closer to the idea not only of artificial intelligence but to the idea that artificial intelligence may be the penultimate step before he starts

³⁷ a fear illustrated countless times from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* to the Jean Baudrillard-inspired *Matrix* movies to the apocalyptic *Terminator* franchise

thinking about computers as the receptacle of that “second soul.”³⁸ In an era that sought to embrace nature as the key to a reinvented, holistic sense of self, the vanishing American has vanished again and has been replaced in a technological era by the autistic savant who performs a similar function “in part out of the mythology and science created by White men to explain him to themselves” (*Vanishing* 12). And what better way to attempt a final understanding of the soul than through the act of bearing witness to the emergence of that soul from the soulless computer? It should be little wonder that the neurotypical’s growing use of and relationship with technology might find an outlet in the bromantic love affair with the autistic techno-savant.

And indeed, it has become a love affair, which film critic John Alberti recognizes as representative of a new and forward-looking venue of an exclusively male understanding of identity:

While critics such as Richard Corliss and Joseph Aisenberg view the bromance mainly as a reactionary, regressive response to the “new climate of social and sexual equality” referred to by Deleyto, I argue that these films [featuring bromantic relationships] can also be understood as engaging self-consciously with both the “perfectly codified conventions” of the traditional romantic comedy and with conflicting representations of masculine identity connected to these conventions. (Alberti, “I Love You Man” 160)

The neurotypical-autistic paring takes this view of the bromance a step further. In addition to asking the bromantic question of what it means to be a man, the juxtaposition of the neurotypical with the autistic techno-savant explores what it means to be a man in a post-phallogentric, post-patriarchal, and technological society which promises (or threatens) to further dilute normative

³⁸ Films that illustrate this final stage where the essence of the human surrenders to an ether-existence within a digital world include *Transcendence*, *Lucy*, *Her*, *Ex Machina*, *The Machine*, *Source Code*, and *Surrogates*, and many others.

gender roles and their accompanying stereotypes. James Kirk, Troy Barnes, Leonard Hofstadter, and John Watson are defined largely by their alpha maleness, which is to say, by their proximity and attraction to women in conventional, heteronormative terms. These male characters may define masculinity with minor variations, but the presence and proximity of their autistic Noble Savants enables them to be men in a world where they are neither masters of nor slaves to technology but can instead achieve a kind of harmonious partnership that enables them to survive and ultimately to thrive in a world where computers, as opposed to women, represent the emotional final frontier. As in Fiedler, the male hero comes to redefine masculinity not in relation to women but in relation to other men. In countless cases, the male protagonist – Gilgamesh, Don Quixote, Ishmael, Huck, Natty Bumppo, McMurphy – leaves society and its definitions and expectations of alpha maleness behind to arrive at a new and arguably better understanding of maleness at the side of, and only at the side of, another male. The neurotypical-autistic relationship carries on this tradition with the significant difference that the transformational bromance can now take place within the confines of “civilised” society.

This bromantic relationship does not exist in a vacuum, however. Nor does it exist as it once did on the periphery of that “civilised” society. Homoerotic expressions of love, while integrating more permanently into today’s modern mainstream, still require a safe space. For Fiedler, the homoeroticism of the 19th century American literary canon needed to exist outside the confines of society. These bromances occurred on the sea, on the river, or in the forest. They often took the narrative form of episodic voyages. Travel away from society and through the natural world was foundational to a romantic, primitivist interpretation of the Noble Savage. For Kirk and Spock, the venue was outer space. After *Rain Man*, however, the neurotypical-autistic partnership returned to the city where homoerotic male love had always existed but where it

could never be expressed. Where Fiedler identifies the forest or the sea as the extra-societal location for the expression of male homoerotic intimacy, the autistic techno-savant relocates that setting. For Troy and Abed, the bromance happens on the campus of their community college and in the dorm room they share. For Leonard and Sheldon, the bromance happens at Cal-Tech and in the apartment they share for the first nine seasons of the series. For Watson and Sherlock, the bromance happens in the streets of London and in Sherlock's flat. These partners have found, within the confines of "civilised" society, the physical home base that so eluded their counterparts examined by Fiedler.

This change in location for homoerotic encounters suggests at least two things: that the type of safe space for such encounters matters and that changes in such locations reflect a shifting level of cultural comfort with such encounters. Simply put, the neurotypical-autistic bromance allows public homoerotic expression without the need for the partnered men to flee the cities and towns of civilised society. In this way, the bromance is a conveyance, a means for men to locate some missing or compromised element of their human selves. When that missing element is identified as a sense of connectedness with the natural world, the bromance moves into the natural world. When that missing element is identified as techno-intellect, the bromance moves into the world of civilisation and culture. The bromance within nature has morphed into a bromance within universities, hospitals, forensics labs, and computer facilities. The autistic techno-savant's apparently biological connection to digital technology obviates the need for physical escape. The alpha male within these texts is searching for access to technology. He cannot find that in the forest, down the river, or on the sea. The male pairings identified by Fiedler had no choice but to vacate society. They went where they had to go. As much as they were looking to escape certain cultural restraints, they were equally in search of some missing

part of their subjective, human selves. That search continues in the neurotypical-autistic partnership; only the setting has changed.

Even within the safety of that setting, the bromance has limits. These are homoerotic encounters in places where intellectually incompatible minds set within sexually incompatible bodies (in culturally, reproductive terms) can meet. In the natural world, the neurotypical-autistic bromantic partners, like Chingachgook and the Deerslayer, “are permitted to sit night after night over their campfire in the purest domestic bliss. So long as there is no mingling of blood, soul may couple with soul in God’s undefiled forest” (“Raft” 31). Fiedler points out the connotations in the language: “Notice the adjective – the virgin forest and the forever inviolable sea” (“Raft” 31). He cites the cultural but never physical “deflowering” within these “unremittingly chaste” spiritual marriages (“Raft” 29) that occur in places replete with eroticism but without sex. Only the souls may couple. As D. H. Lawrence explains, “[t]hat the Natty and Chingachgook myth must remain a myth. It is wish-fulfillment, an evasion of actuality...It seems there can be no fusion of the flesh” (Lawrence 57). Today, the forest can no longer claim to be undefiled any more than the sea can be called inviolable. In the contemporary world, where the “buggery of sailors” (Fiedler “Raft” 32) remains a perceived threat to culturally-inscribed notions of alpha masculinity, the bromance goes where it is culturally safe to be: into the science fiction of outer space or else up the ivory tower, the next two physical final frontiers for the producers and consumers of advanced digital technologies. It is there that, no longer the dark-skinned brother but instead the pale and alien computerized companion will “take us in, we assure ourselves, after we have been cut off, or have cut ourselves off from all others, without rancor or the insult of forgiveness. He will fold us in his arms saying, ‘Honey’ or ‘Aikane’; he will comfort us as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real” (“Raft” 33). In general

terms, it is a reconciliation of the civilised and the savage, of the white and the black, and of the abled and the disabled. Specifically, however, the neurotypical-autistic bromantic relationships function as a new model for romantic male encounters.

For Fiedler, the sought-after embrace represented an impossible dream: “The dream recedes; the immaculate passion and the astonishing reconciliation become a memory, and less, a regret, at last the unrecognized motifs of a child’s book. ‘It’s too good to be true, Honey,’ Jim says to Huck” (“Raft” 34). Fiedler finds childhood innocence and, ultimately, adult futility in that literary embrace. In portrayal, it is also an impossible embrace for an autistic, yet it is a tantalizing goal that is repeated nearly without variation throughout the neurotypical-autistic partnerships of TV and film: In the culminating moment of *Rain Man*, Charlie gets an unexpected touching of foreheads from his autistic brother. In *The Big Bang Theory*, Leonard is equally stunned to get a hug from Sheldon who, in an otherwise unheard of moment of mourning, seeks solace after the death of his childhood TV hero “Professor Proton” (Bob Newhart). In *Temple Grandin*, Temple’s mother (Julia Ormond) chokes back tears when she finally receives a lifelong-awaited hug from her autistic daughter. Troy and Abed, unlike most other figures in the neurotypical-autistic bromance, are unapologetic about their level of physical affection. Although even this physical affection, as it must, stops short of out-of-the-closet homosexuality. In the conversation about the rhetorical function of the autistic techno-savant, such acts of connectedness represent the promise that man’s technological efforts have not been in vain, that man can yet endow the biological machine with just enough emotion so that it will hold him and forgive him but not quite so much that it will *become* him.

Rare literary and filmic exceptions such as the relationship between Mikael Blomkvist and Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* series, notwithstanding, there are

reasons that both characters in this configuration have been and remain male. Among these reasons are the forbidden made acceptable, the marriage of masculinity with technology, and the symbolic reconciliation of the abled and the disabled. Given the imperative to innovate, within the confines of generic restrictions, part of this has to do with the simple novelty of a male-male, neurotypical-autistic pairing. With autism as an insurgent condition in popular consciousness, the autistic is tailor-made to be slotted in next to a neurotypical, heteronormative alpha male protagonist. Still, this is far more than a simple variant on the “Odd Couple, Thrown-Together” trope found in countless buddy cop TV shows and films. To be sure, the neurotypical-autistic partnership shares some features of male-male partnerships found in buddy films such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Lethal Weapon*, *48 Hours*, *Running Scared*, *Rush Hour*, *Tango and Cash*, *I Love You Man*, and *Wedding Crashers*. But the neurotypical-autistic bromance, takes the dynamic to a new level, one that adds elements of technocentrism and (dis)ability to the equation.

Illustrating the point, critic Celestino Deleyto emphasizes the newness of this explorative feature of romantic pairings:

It is as if the new climate of social and sexual equality between men and women had rendered heterosexual desire less vital, as if the perfectly codified conventions that have been valid for so long had lost much of their meaning and become nothing more than picturesque museum pieces—to be admired but not believed. Disenchanted by this state of affairs, the genre has started to explore other types of relationships between people and to consider their incorporation into their plots... Friendships between men, between women, or between men and women have started to proliferate in the space of romantic comedy. (“Between Friends” 169)

What I observe in the literary and cinematic genres is a new but also more profound and meaningful version of this “friendship between men” where the man, rather than becoming more feminized to “win the woman” as exhibited in romantic comedies of the *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *Switch*, and *White Chicks* cross-dressing and gender-bending genre, is instead a 2.0 version of the bromance where even another alpha man is not good enough as a partner. Two alpha males are more likely to cross the psychological bromantic threshold into homosexuality. Troy and Abed cease to fulfill their rhetorical function if they are simply a gay couple. Kirk and Spock cease to fulfill their rhetorical function if both are alpha male lotharios or both are socially inept techno-savants. For Fiedler, the similarity of the alpha males in function and shared space in the social hierarchy “threatens to compromise an essential aspect of American sentimental life: the camaraderie of the locker room and ball park, the good fellowship of the poker game and fishing trip, a kind of passionless passion, at once gross and delicate, homoerotic in the boy’s sense, possessing an innocence above suspicion” (“Raft 27). In all manifestations of the bromance, that “camaraderie of the locker room” must remain intact. In terms of the bromance and what it represents both in contemporary terms and as an archetype, Kirk cannot partner with another Kirk any more than Rain Man can partner with another Rain Man. This, then, necessitates that the autistic partner embody enough stereotypical female characteristics to keep the partnership just this side of sexual but close enough to satisfy the intimate bonding obligations of the bromance. For the bromance to balance, at least some elements of conventional, culturally-constructed masculinity need to be preserved.

As *The McGill Daily* contributing writer Amina Batyreva points out, the homoeroticism must exist as a *subtext*: “While *Star Trek*’s Kirk and Spock have one of the most iconic bromances in modern entertainment, the alternative subculture that believes the two share a

deeper homoerotic bond was never close enough to the mainstream to threaten the platonic perception of the same-sex relationship in *Star Trek*'s original run in the Sixties" (Batyreva).

Although the trope of homoeroticism as explored by Fiedler and expanded here to encompass the partnered autistic techno-savant appears to have risen much closer to the surface of popular consciousness in recent decades, certain gender restrictions and sexual taboos remain in place.

Before moving on, and, given this subtle but, in this context, unbreachable border between chaste and sexual male love, Batyreva's analysis of the ideological dimensions of the term "bromance" is worth citing here in full:

People use "bromance" to completely close off the possibility of romantic or sexual same-sex interaction between two close male friends. It's defensive and painfully self-conscious, trying to pre-empt the accusation of homosexuality before it can be lobbed. It is akin to "no homo" but made more palatable for self-identifying enlightened liberal audiences. It is akin to the phrases "man crush" and "girl crush," used to refer to feelings of affection beyond the heterosexual norm towards a person of the same sex – feelings that are rendered harmless through the same linguistic process that makes the term "bromance" such a powerful tool for erasing homoerotic subtext. Close same-sex friendships have been around in fiction and the media since the dawn of civilization (check out Gilgamesh and his gallivanting male companion, Enkidu), but it is a special brand of insidious homophobia that takes these same-sex relationships and sanitizes them for the heteronormative audience. (Batyreva)

This "special brand of homophobia" may be insidious, but it is also necessary in this context.

The modern bromance serves the dual purpose of allowing and enabling love between males while simultaneously shielding audiences from the full impact of that love as a threat to strict

cultural and religious traditions of heteronormative definitions of love, sex, and affection. An overlooked component of the modern bromance, whether between two heteronormative, neurotypical men or, as in this case, between a neurotypical and an autistic techno-savant, is that these relationships are “safe”; that is, they question and challenge certain societal taboos, but they do not cross the line into sex, nor do they overtly denounce heteronormativity as the sole domain for expressions of human love, although the bromance does challenge heteronormativity implicitly and by way of its visual rhetorical devices that place men in close physical proximity to each other and removed from women.

The bromance is the liminal space where safety meets freedom. Fiedler refers to each generation’s compulsion to “play out the impossible mythos, and we live to see our children play it: the white boy and the black we can discover wrestling affectionately on any American sidewalk, along which they will walk in adulthood, eyes averted from each other, unwilling to touch even by accident” (“Raft” 34). The portrayed autistic savant, typically asexual or stereotypically feminine in physicality and sensibility, like his archetypal precursors, enables a romance-free bromance to play out unblemished (to use a socially loaded term) by the possibility of homosexual love. The apparent caveat of “no sexual interactions in bromance between heterosexual men” (Smith 16) remains as true in the neurotypical-autistic bromance as it is in Fiedler. In each case, the partnered Other, whether animalistic, ethnic, or technological, enables the bromance through his anti-social nature and by his role as partial stand-in for a woman.

THE AUTISTIC TECHNO-SAVANT AS A STAND-IN FOR WOMEN

While autism by its nature evokes analysis of the mind, the often “feminised” autistic body must not be ignored in the connection of the portrayed autistic techno-savant with the othered partner of the Fiedler archetype. Combined, the autistic mind and the phenomenological autistic body function as metonymic of the processing speeds of the digital era. The autistic figure enables the heteronormative alpha male to relate to digital technology without the threat of cyborg integration or of physical disembodiment. The autistic figure further enables the heteronormative alpha male to relate to another male without the threat of homosexuality, which would, in mainstream cultural terms, compromise his alpha maleness.

As I illustrate in Chapter 2, the “feminized” look of the autistic techno-savant serves a vital visual rhetorical purpose. This purpose works in lock-step with the role of the autistic in the bromance. The autistic techno-savant embodies a consistent physiognomy and is commonly portrayed as being stereotypically effeminate in build and mannerisms and nearly completely lacking in the sexual drive that characterizes his neurotypical partner. Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock, for example, are tall, clean shaven, and of narrow build with elongated facial features. Such visual rhetorical features function within the bromance to unite the neurotypical partner with a man who is stereotypically “less of a man” and aids in the transition of masculine love away from the body and toward the mind. Spock maintains that “Intelligence does not require bulk” (*Star Trek* 2:3 “The Changeling”). Jeff refers to Abed as “dark Jamie Lee Curtis” (*Community* 2:12 “Asian Population Studies”). Chuck Lorre, executive producer of *The Big Bang Theory*, reportedly referred to the character Sheldon Cooper, played by openly gay actor Jim Parsons, as “neither straight nor gay, but ‘other’” (Ausiello). Irene Adler (Lara Pulver) of *Sherlock* insists that “Brainy’s the new sexy” (*Sherlock* 2:1 “A Scandal in Belgravia”). Although the surface and symbolic dynamics of the partnership remain consistent, the physicality of the

modern bromantic pairing is the exact opposite of the traditional. Where Fiedler observes that the “immense guilt of guilt must not be mitigated any more than the disparity of color (Queequeg is not merely brown but monstrously tattooed; Chingachgook is horrid with paint; Jim is portrayed as the sick A-rab died blue)” (“Raft” 33), the autistic techno-savant is presented as lean, symmetrical, and less physically “monstrous” than his predecessor. Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock have certain physical features and character traits in common such as close-cropped dark hair, naiveté about adult society, general guilelessness, and they are respectively taller and thinner than Kirk, Troy, Leonard, and Watson. No longer the adult black man juxtaposed with the white child, no longer Chief, the 6’8” Indian or Enkidu, the hairy man-beast, this new partner more closely represents the sleek lines and smooth surfaces of an era populated with Ikeas and iPods. In practice, the resulting emotional bromantic characteristics remain the same. The physical differences are necessary “so that the final reconciliation may seem more unbelievable and tender. The archetype makes no attempt to deny our outrage as fact; it portrays it as meaningless in the face of love” (“Raft” 33).

Nothing about the essence of the love-hate dynamic that Fiedler observes in the male relationships between “civilised” and “savage” has changed; only its outer trappings have morphed in response to new cultural models. In his series of essays on the cinematic bromance, John Alberti refers to an “...obsession with gay sexuality and the mixture of homophobia and homophilia that runs throughout these movies and that has given rise to the term ‘bromance’ itself” (11). The neurotypical-autistic bromance represents a shift of man’s relationship with and understanding of modern technology. The bromance functions as a liberating means for heterosexual male partners to experience homoerotic love without the possibility of consummation and, unlike the bromance of the modern cinematic mainstream, to engage in a

homoamorous encounter without the descent into adolescence and arrested masculinity that, itself, would function to obviate potentially tabooed sexual tension. With the autistic techno-savant as the ostensibly feminine of the bromantic pairing, there is no apologetic need for frat jokes, back slaps, or shoulder chucks to remind audiences that these are heteronormative men. For Fiedler, “[j]ust as the pure love of man and man is in general set off against the ignoble passion of man for woman, so more specifically (and more vividly) the dark desire which leads to miscegenation is contrasted with the ennobling love of a white man and a colored one,” (“Raft” 30) or, in this case, of a neurotypical with an autistic techno-savant. In both cases, the bromance functions to illuminate an interesting reversal where male-female relationships are characterised by a type of surface love with problems and complications boiling below that surface while male-male relationships are characterised by a host of problems and complications on the surface with the “ennobling love” at its core.

I must note here that the neurotypical-autistic bromance is a vehicle for love but never for sex. In visual rhetorical terms, the neurotypical-autistic bromance walks a line between physical proximity and sexual intimacy. “Physical it all is,” Fiedler observes of the 19th century canonical examples, “yet somehow ultimately innocent...Ishmael’s sensations as he wakes under the pressure of Queequeg’s arm, the tenderness of Huck’s repeated loss and re-finding of Jim, the role of almost Edenic helpmate played for Bumpo by the Indian – these shape us from childhood: we have no sense of first discovering them or of having been once without them” (“Raft” 29). Kirk and Spock may share an unexpressed love, but they rarely if ever touch and are separated even in Spock’s death in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* by a wall of glass. In *The Big Bang Theory*, Leonard and Sheldon rarely touch. Sherlock Holmes and John Watson occasionally share a flat, yet there is always a sense of physical distance between them. Of the

autistic characters under consideration, only Troy and Abed, with their best-buddy handshake and occasional hugs, begin to break the modern taboo against touching. Otherwise, Fiedler's observations of these intimate interactions that have "shaped us from childhood" remain intact. As a figure commonly understood to exhibit symptoms such as sensory aversion, hypertonia, and hypotonia, the autistic in these cases functions as a figure tailor-made to preclude the type of physical contact that "threatens" to bridge the gap between love and sex.

Embedded within the above pop culture examples is a common theme of proximity and distance, of rupture and reunion. This is the rhetorical space between love and sex where the Self nearly but unsuccessfully reconciles with the Other. This literary and cultural space has been occupied by the racialized pairings of black and white and by the transhumanist pairings of human and machine. The pairing of the neurotypical with the autistic is the latest in a line of contrived partnerships that reflect the push-pull dynamic of the Self on its quest, no matter how culturally taboo, to join with the Other. For Fiedler, it is within the sex of adulthood that the love of boyhood is lost. The autistic techno-savant's immaturity and asexuality are cornerstone elements in his relationship with a neurotypical partner, and they are what keep the pure love of the bromance alive.

The autistic and the neurotypical are inextricably tied together in this interstitial space. Their relationship in popular culture is almost always one of affection by proximity and survival by means of mutual support. And yet the couple never crosses the line of physical love. Theirs is a quasi-reluctant acknowledgment of mutual reliance, a relationship fraught with antagonism and riddled with a strain of polar rejection as if the pair were a repelling set of like magnets. They transform into juvenile prototypes: the boy who loves the girl by hitting her, the girl who loves the boy by hating him. Invoking again the significance of the bromance specifically in "boys'

books,” I return to Fiedler who argues that this is the “implacable nostalgia for the infantile, at once wrong-headed and somehow admirable” (“Raft” 27). It is not accidental that this is an equally fitting, albeit perhaps misguided and offensive, characterization of the autistic mind: “wrong-headed and somehow admirable.” In this way, the autistic is a fitting character for acquisition by pop culture producers. Like the Noble Savage, a figure characterised by naiveté and knowledge, the autistic offers a set of internal contradictions that render him a manufactured rhetorical construct seemingly designed to fulfill his counterpart’s emotional and spiritual needs in a way that a woman cannot.

The bromance works by embodying the Self-Other dichotomy and its attempted reconciliation and by elevating homoerotic love over hetero- or homosexual sex. The neurotypical-autistic bromance plays off the juxtaposition of the autistic’s characteristic rigid logic and social naiveté and the homoeroticism inherent in a bromantic male pairing as illustrated in numerous examples of the homoerotic nature of the neurotypical-autistic bromance. A brief survey of some of those near-the-surface examples of homoeroticism help to illustrate the point:

Abed has created avatars for each character for the role-playing game “Dungeons and Dragons”:

ANNIE: I’m... ew, “Hector,” the well-endowed? Abed!

ABED: I didn’t know you’d pick one at random. I made that one with Troy in mind.

(*Community* 2:14 “Advanced Dungeons and Dragons”)

In *The Big Bang Theory*, Leonard refers to his relationship with Sheldon in homosexual terms:

HOWARD: So, who wants to rent *Fiddler*?

SHELDON: No need. We have the special edition.

LEONARD [referring to a previously mentioned homosexual couple]: Well, maybe we are like Haroon and Tanvir. (*The Big Bang Theory* 1:8 “The Grasshopper Experiment”)

In *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes is understood either as asexual:

MYCROFT: "Don't be alarmed. It is to do with sex."

SHERLOCK: "Sex doesn't alarm me."

MYCROFT: "How would *you* know?" (*Sherlock* 2:1 “A Scandal in Belgravia”)

or as engaged in a homosexual “marriage” with John Watson:

DR. JOHN WATSON: Yeah. We're getting married. Well, I'm going to ask, anyway.

MRS. HUDSON: So soon after Sherlock [has apparently died]?

DR. JOHN WATSON: Hmm, well, yes.

MRS. HUDSON: What's his name?

DR. JOHN WATSON: [sighs] It's a woman.

MRS. HUDSON: A woman?

DR. JOHN WATSON: Yes, of course it's a woman.

MRS. HUDSON: [laughs quietly] You really have moved on, haven't you?

DR. JOHN WATSON: Mrs. Hudson, how many times?... Sherlock was not my boyfriend.

MRS. HUDSON: Live and let live, that's my motto.

DR. JOHN WATSON: Listen to me. *I am not gay!* (*Sherlock* 3:1 “The Empty Hearse”)

In the original *Star Trek* TV series, Kirk and Spock express their love in numerous and varied ways as illustrated in the following three examples:

1. KIRK: Either one of us by himself is expendable. Both of us are not. (*Star Trek* 1:26 “Devil in the Dark”)

2. SPOCK [to Kirk]: I have been and always shall be yours. (*Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*)

3. KIRK [as Janice Lester to Spock]: You are closer to the captain than to anyone in the universe. (*Star Trek* 3:24 “Turnabout Intruder”)

In this final example, which is also the final episode of the original series, Spock appears to hold onto Kirk/Lester’s hand in a protective act of love for approximately twenty-five seconds of screen time at the thirty-minute mark.

Although Kirk and Spock, like most other neurotypical-autistic pairs, rarely touch, allowances are made in examples such as this when Kirk’s mind has entered Janice Lester’s body or, as in other cases, when one or the other of the bromantic pair has been similarly compromised by an alien presence. According to *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry, “Yes, there’s certainly some of that – certainly with love overtones. Deep love. The only difference being, the Greek ideal – we never suggested in the series – physical love between the two. But...we certainly had the feeling that the affection was sufficient for that, if that were the particular style of the 23rd century” (Shatner 147). As in Fiedler, such ostensibly platonic affection is a thinly-veiled stand-in for physical love. Significantly, such moments approach but never cross over into homosexuality. The bromance is a semi-permeable membrane that allows male emotional expressions of love while rejecting the intimacy of sex. This is liminal space that is easily and perhaps best occupied by these extremes of dualistic, Humanist conceptions of masculinity: the warrior-lothario and the tunnel-visioned man of logic and technology.

This dualism of masculinity is neatly encapsulated in the iconic Kirk-Spock relationship, and I find that it is from this specific relationship that the neurotypical-autistic bromance finds its roots. This tandem has contributed a goldmine of exchanges in the form of Kirk as the

neurotypical alpha male, Spock as his logic-driven significant other, and Dr. McCoy as the embodiment of culturally-ingrained fears, prejudices, and insecurities. In the original *Star Trek* episode “The Ultimate Computer,” for example, McCoy points out that computers lack compassion. Spock responds that machines are more efficient than human beings: not better. He then hypothesizes that if McCoy’s engrams were impressed in a computer, “the resulting torrential flood of illogic would be most entertaining.” This provides an early example of the neurotypical-autistic bromance in action. The Kirk-Spock union exemplifies a socio-technological enlightenment as the bromantic partners grow beyond McCoy’s everyman caprice, insecurity, and fear of being both alone and out of place in a technological world. McCoy’s fear of technology, as indicated by his oft-cited phobia of transporters, is resolved not by Kirk’s cavalier insistence nor by Spock’s logical assertion that there is nothing to fear; rather, the fear of technology is finally expunged by the combination of Kirk’s emotional and Spock’s logical response to what both agree is an irrational fear of an advanced technology, in this case anyway, that literally deconstructs and reconstructs the human body. As this male-male-male love triangle exemplifies, the neurotypical-autistic bromance provides what neither partner alone can accomplish; that is, the reconciliation of what are arguably the best parts of men and of the technological world they create and inhabit. According to the bromantic model, this can be accomplished only in the absence of women.

MASCULINITY IN AUTISTIC ISOLATION

The neurotypical’s fear of being alone, or, unpartnered, is another factor that makes the autistic an appropriate vehicle for the modern bromance. The autistic, in both clinical and

cultural terms, is often identified by what Leo Kanner originally described as “an extreme aloneness” (245). In visual rhetorical terms, the autistic, then, is a collection of affects that are manufactured to create an opportunity for an overcoming of aloneness. The autistic’s nearly uncompromising autonomous subjectivity is one of the main features of the autistic character that is both feared and coveted by the neurotypical. Fiedler’s essay, at its core, is about this dilemma between wanting to and being afraid of being alone. “... Ishmael is in all of us, our unconfessed universal fear...that compelling anxiety, which every foreigner notes, that we may not be loved, that we are loved for our possessions and not ourselves that we are really – *alone*. It is that underlying terror which explains our incredulity in the face of adulation or favor, what is called (once more the happy adjective) our ‘boyish modesty’” (“Raft” 33, orig. italics). The neurotypical-autistic bromance shares this dilemma between biological affect and culturally-imposed identity formation. The bromance comprises a gregarious prototypical alpha male who must often act alone but who, in a technological world of computers and science, must seek out the company of the one whom he can neither program nor seduce. For his part, the techno-savant, in keeping with the apparent anti-social nature of the autistic, appears to exist in a kind of self or societally-imposed isolation. Kirk has “always known that I’ll die alone” (*Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*). Spock is enigmatic and solitary by nature. Sheldon is dismissive and openly contemptuous of nearly everyone around him. After being freed from a locker by Troy, Abed gushes, “For the first time in my long history of being locked inside things, I knew someone would come” (*Community* 4:3 “Conventions of Space and Time”). When Sherlock Holmes disagrees with Mrs. Hudson that “marriage changes people,” she points out that “Well, you wouldn’t understand ‘cause you always live alone” (*Sherlock* 3:2 “The Sign of Three”). Among its other rhetorical functions, the bromance serves to address and to reconcile the neurotypical’s

fear that he will be abandoned, left behind, or rendered obsolete in a world that seems to no longer need him. As conventional notions of alpha maleness recede in the wake of women's and civil rights movements, the neurotypical male latches onto the autistic as a potential pathway to continued relevance.

In the worlds of popular culture, the neurotypical male does not fear being without a woman, but he does fear being alone. Again, dozens of examples illustrate the point: Of himself and his savant companions, Leonard Hofstadter wants to know, "Then why do we go home alone every night? We're still smart" ("The Jerusalem Duality" 1:12). In *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, when faced with his final mortality and thinking he was going to die at the hands of "God," Kirk is reminded by Spock that his death was "not possible. You were never alone." (At which point Kirk moves as if to hug Spock but is stopped by his Vulcan companion, a significant moment of Fiedler-esque male attraction and preclusion.) When Mrs. Hudson has been shot, John Watson implores Sherlock: "She's dying... You machine. Sod this. Sod this. You stay here if you want, on your own" to which Sherlock replies, "Alone is what I have. Alone protects me" (*Sherlock* 2:3 "The Reichenbach Fall"). This pattern reveals a rhetorical mechanism at work in the construction, not just of the autistic, but specifically, of the relationship between the male autistic and the male neurotypical. The autistic intrigues his alpha male counterpart because he does not seem to need anyone and appears to prefer solitude or the company of computers and technology to a social life among others. As in Fiedler, the male protagonist, the heroic "man's man" as it were, realizes only in the company of his historically marginalized bromantic partner that he too is an "other." It is also only within the bromance that the alpha male can remove heteronormative sex from the stereotyped list of requirements for what it means to be a man.

In this regard, the neurotypical-autistic bromance moves in careful circles around the subject of sex. This manifestation of the bromance is not the sexually-repressed macho bromance of the locker room or of the football field. In keeping with the unwritten rules of the bromance, neither the neurotypical nor the techno-savant is permitted to abandon his partner in favour of a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. Outside of the Kirk-Spock bromance, Kirk has his dalliances and his one-night stands, but he is married to his ship. In *Community*, Troy doesn't date for most of the series. (He does have an awkward season-long relationship with Britta to be addressed below.) A former football player, an entrenched stereotyped essence of male physicality and sexuality, Troy remains true to Abed, his autistic techno-savant partner. As Annie, Troy's potential love interest laments, "The other day after Spanish I thought he [Troy] was trying to hold my hand, but... he'd just mistaken me for Abed" (*Community* 1:15 "Romantic Expressionism"). *The Big Bang Theory* originally centered on the romantic flirtations between Leonard and Penny. But at the end of each episode, Leonard returned to his apartment with Sheldon. John Watson marries in the BBC series *Sherlock*, but his wife Mary, still in keeping with the unwritten rules of the bromance, dies in the act of saving Sherlock from being shot, a narrative conceit that enables Watson and Sherlock to return to their bromance unfettered. The autistic techno-savant, for his part, remains chaste, desiring neither love nor companionship from anyone except his neurotypical partner.³⁹ It is the central relationship between men that drives the narrative, and it is the unique quality of the autistic that functions in tandem with the neurotypical leading man to generate a type of pure love beyond the scope of the established heteronormative.

³⁹ Spock experiences Pon-farr, a surging sex drive which he represses every seven years. Sheldon eventually enters a relationship with Amy Farrah Fowler, but it is more file-sharing at first than normative romance. Abed and Troy compete for the affections of the college librarian only to abandon the courtship when they realize that she can never appreciate either of them as much as they appreciate (read: love) each other.

I must emphasize at this point the significance of the corollary between the autistic brain (whether as clinically illustrated or as culturally perceived) and popular perceptions of the computer as a metaphorized human brain. The autistic techno-savant is the ultimate expression of the “personal” computer, the technology that exists not only of man’s creation and for his benefit but as something integral to his understanding of what it means to be human being in a technological age. At the juncture of the human and the technological and within the precincts of the cinematic bromance, the autistic techno-savant has a humanizing influence on the neurotypical. Embodied by the likes of Spock, Leonard, Abed, and Sherlock and others, he represents Tyrell’s “more human than human” claim from *Blade Runner*, an aberrant culmination of human ingenuity that points to something that mankind has yet to become. Tyrell’s claim is correct with a qualifier: The symbiosis of the human and the technological is an achievable aspiration, but the result is a post-modern Frankenstein that appeals more in theory than in realization. This is where the bromance serves as a more palatable and manageable metaphor for the ultimate marriage of man and computer. As it must be, the union is symbolic rather than practical. “Roy Batty” (like Frankenstein, the Terminator, and a genre of cyborgs in between) represents the *literal* union of man and technology. In the bromance, as I have demonstrated, the literal union must never be, although the aspiration itself survives death. In *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, McCoy asks if the evolving computer “V’Ger” “...wants to physically join with a human. Is that possible?” The neurotypical-autistic bromance is the answer, in visual rhetorical terms, to McCoy’s non-rhetorical question. The concept of joining, whether between black and white or between emotion and logic – but always between male and male – is the essence of the bromance. It can be the joining of a white man and a man-beast, of a white man and a non-white ethnic minority, or of man and machine as in the cyborg. In this case,

the joining of man to artificial intelligence is personified by the neurotypical-autistic bromance. And in all cases, the joining happens with the exclusion of women and of sex.

TECHNO-MASCULINITY BY WAY OF FEMALE EXCLUSION

Although I will elaborate in the following chapter on the sexual dynamic, or, of its absence, in the bromance and in the construction of the autistic character across genres, I would be remiss if I did not address the rhetorical function of Fiedler's observation of the elision of women. Of the 19th century American literature that he examines, Fiedler notes that "As boys' books, we should expect them shyly, guiltlessly as it were, to proffer a chaste male love as the ultimate emotional experience – and this is spectacularly the case" ("Raft" 28). It is perhaps the impossibility of an emotional connection with the autistic that inspires the neurotypical to pursue one. Despite being uber-male specimens with movie star looks and Svengali-like power over women, the neurotypical hero in the neurotypical-autistic bromantic pairing lives a life among women but almost never *with* them in the sense of being involved a long-term heteronormative relationship.

In *Rain Man*, Charlie Babbitt abandons his girlfriend in pursuit of even a thread of an emotional connection with his brother Raymond, the paragon of the autistic techno-savant. Kirk's relationship with Spock easily trumps his relationships with any of Kirk's many sexual partners. Troy unfailingly prefers Abed's company to the company of women. Even after he finally marries in Season 9, Leonard's on-again, off-again relationship with Penny is consistently compromised by his relationship with Sheldon. In each case, the relationship of the neurotypical hero with women is reliably sporadic, superficial, and fleeting. Just as Charlie Babbitt's

girlfriend disappears from *Rain Man*, Troy switches sensibilities with Abed (*Community* 4:11 “Basic Human Anatomy”) to end his awkward relationship with Britta. Interestingly, Troy and Britta are shown holding hands at one point and in bed together at another. But they never kiss and are shown almost entirely at odds with one another, usually over Troy’s unbreakable relationship with Abed. Other than this single example, Troy is almost never shown dating despite numerous references to his social popularity and sexual prowess. Kirk’s relationships with women are equally transitory. Throughout the original series, he feigns affection (“Shahna” from “Gamesters of Triskelion”), is seduced through hypnosis (“Elaan” from “Elaan of Troyius”), is sexually attracted to an android (“Rayna” from “Requiem for Methuselah”), falls in love under a bout of amnesia (“Miramanee” from “The Paradise Syndrome”), enters into an ill-advised tryst with a disguised alien (“Kelinda” from “By Any Other Name”), is enticed by a mental fantasy pulled from his past (“Ruth” from “Shore Leave”), and allows the woman (“Edith Keeler” from “City on the Edge of Forever”), who could be the love of his life, to die in order to preserve a historical timeline. In each case, the neurotypical hero engages in posturing acts of heterosexual love to prove that he can fulfill his role as alpha male if needed. In each case, he must first establish his gender-normative sexual prowess before he can engage acceptably with his male partner. The protagonist must be shown to possess the stereotypical qualities of the man par excellence, with all the attendant tendencies for passion, virility, and aversion to logic, before entering the bromantic partnership with an autistic character. In each case, the hero returns to Fiedler’s notion of “chaste male love” as his emotional home base.

As suggested earlier, the irony with the autistic techno-savant is that his most prominent “handicap” or socio-cultural deficiency is his apparent lack of empathy or emotionality, which, as it turns out, is also his most seductive trait. As neurotypical creators of a technological world,

the neurotypical hero longs to imbue that world with human intuition, passion, empathy, and a soul, all the things that he considers to be the best parts of himself. Finding that impossible, he seeks out the next best thing: a symbolic marriage between himself and the personified representation of human technological ingenuity at its best. It is for a reason that the sexual dynamic is removed from the equation and that the bromantic partners are “immune to lust” (“Raft” 27). There is no room for romance in the bromance, or, as Fiedler says, “Everything goes except the frank description of adult heterosexual love. After all, boys will be boys!” (“Raft” 28). Perhaps it is because autism affects primarily males that Fiedler’s dynamic appears to be played out again so neatly as a modern bromance. The autistic is, after all, in many ways the antithesis of the stereotypical woman. On the opposite end from the female on the emotional spectrum, the autistic functions as a female alternative in much the same way that the cyborg does. The relationship, whether between man and cyborg or between man and autistic techno-savant, is one of love, integration, interconnectedness, and techno-human marriage that, in each case, removes women from the equation and stops short of physical intimacy.

As anything beyond platonic love, the neurotypical-autistic relationship does not work either in fact or in fiction. Leonard and Sheldon do not work if one is a woman. Kirk and Spock do not work if one is a woman. Troy and Abed do not work if one is a woman. Watson and Sherlock do not work if one is a woman. Heterosexuality in these cases invites a sense of culturally-inculcated completion that vitiates the quest for love, which, arguably, is among the most powerful motivating forces in Western drama. In the same way that modern sitcoms may rely on the “will they or won’t they” trope when dealing with the leading man and leading lady, so too does the bromance allow for a tantalizing sense of emotional proximity without

consummation or even the possibility of consummation that might be found with a hetero or homosexual leading couple.

Charlie Babbitt's love interest Susanna (Valeria Golino) disappears from most of *Rain Man* for the same reason. Charlie loses Raymond as well, but their emotional bond remains intact with Charlie having "made a connection" with his autistic brother. In *Adam*, Adam (Hugh Dancy) and Beth (Rose Byrne) attempt to engage in a romantic relationship, but their efforts ultimately fail. Adam cannot be social with Beth, pick up on her non-verbal cues, relate to her as a sexual partner, or respond appropriately to her emotional needs. The autistic exists either in solitude or in the nonsexual bromantic partnership with a heterosexual alpha male. Sexual attraction and physical love threaten the chaste bond between man and computer. Fiedler observes that "The buggery of sailors is taken for granted everywhere, yet is thought of usually as an inversion forced on men by their isolation from women; though the opposite case may well be true: the isolation sought more or less consciously as an occasion for male encounters" ("Raft" 32). In the same way, the neurotypical-autistic bromance is a perhaps consciously sought-after "occasion for male encounters" rather than an inversion forced on two extreme types of men who are stereotypically either too able or not able enough to "get the girl."

In *Homosexuality in History*, British journalist and novelist Colin Spencer points out that "[t]his intimacy...simulates ancient notions of Greek and Roman brotherhood; a time in which men's homosocial bonds were culturally prized" (qtd. in Anderson 81). The bromance is the continued manifestation of that prized relationship. Beyond the rudimentary pairing represented by the cyborg, the neurotypical-autistic bromance adds to that the prized relationship of the human with the technological. As an apparently "programmed" individual, the autistic technosavant appeals to a neurotypical drive to complete his own identity, not just as a unique

individual, but as a man in a world where masculinity itself has become a plural and increasingly interrogated construct.

The neurotypical-autistic bromance is, in part, an answer to the 21st century version of the question, “What does it mean to be a man?” In the fictional, pop cultural worlds of idealized human-computer hybridization, the answer to this question has less and less to do with women. Instead, maleness has come to be redefined by consumers of popular culture by men’s interactions with each other. To a certain degree, as Fiedler points out, this is as it has always been. The new wrinkle to Fiedler’s observation about the “buggery of sailors” is that with increasing frequency, the second man, the “other” against whom the central neurotypical man is compared, no longer represents a natural, cultural, or mechanical world; instead, he now typifies the neurological leap forward that computer technology exemplifies and that the autistic techno-savant embodies. Kirk’s manhood is not defined by his sexual conquests but by his undying and unbreakable bond with Spock. Troy is more attractive to Annie (Alison Brie) because he ignores her in favor of his bromantic partner Abed. Leonard’s ties to science, academia, his career, and by extension to Sheldon who will always need him as a guide in a perplexing world of social conventions, prevent him for eight seasons of the show from establishing a long-term sexual or romantic relationship with Penny who remains just out of reach across the hall. John Watson’s marriage to Mary is doomed, in thematic terms, by the necessity of Watson’s unfettered bromantic relationship with Sherlock.

As such cases illustrate, the autistic techno-savant must have a *single* neurotypical partner to complete the bromance. As painful as it might be for the autistic to lose his neurotypical partner, it is far worse for him to lose his partner to a woman. That would represent an insurmountable betrayal. To avoid the bromance-killing crossover into homosexuality, the

woman must remain nearby, out of reach, but handy, to put it crudely. In this realm of homosocial bonding, women become extraneous commodities, no longer the object of affection but a secondary goal to be aspired to only in the most haphazard and incidental way. In the neurotypical-autistic bromance, no one gets the girl. Alpha males Kirk, Troy, Leonard, and Watson have their dalliances. Their counterparts Spock, Abed, Sheldon, and Sherlock have flirtations with women, but these are aberrations, two computers downloading each other's information and negotiating passionless flirtations and affectations of romance. Played for laughs, these latter encounters are awkward and pseudo-romantic, presented in stark contrast to the traditional courtship between a neurotypical leading man and lady.

This brings me back to Fiedler's assertion that "at the focus of emotion, where we are accustomed to find in the world's great novels some heterosexual passion, be it 'platonic' love or adultery, seduction, rape, or long-drawn-out flirtation, we come instead on the fugitive slave and the no-account boy lying side by side on a raft borne by the endless river toward an impossible escape..." ("Raft" 28). It is a nearly perfect parallel and, despite being a relatively small sample in the worlds of the historical and contemporary bromance, it is one that is likely to be reproduced with greater frequency as the autistic techno-savant supplants his literary predecessors as the one lying side by side with the neurotypical protagonist. Women disappear along with the testosterone-fueled side of the neurotypical alpha-male players, the narcissistic would-be seducers of women. It is a gendered dynamic "to which our greatest writers have compulsively returned, telling over and over again the story of that sacred-heathen love between a White man and a colored man in a world without women" (*Vanishing* 119). Kirk's sexual prowess takes a back seat. Troy turns his back on a career as a macho football star. Leonard Hofstadter, to a lesser but comparable degree, in his on-again, off-again flirtatious pursuit of

Penny, is the most typically male of his effeminate and emasculated friends. Watson resists implications in the newspapers that he and Sherlock are engaged in a homosexual relationship. And yet none of their asserted alpha maleness helps them to become any more human. They are at their most manly on their own or in the company of women, but they are at their best, at their most complete, and, arguably, most in love, when partnered with their autistic other.

CONCLUSION – “COME BACK TO THE RAFT AG’IN RAIN MAN, HONEY!”

As in Fiedler, the protagonist needs an “other,” someone he can presume to teach and from whom he can, by accident, learn from in return. The most important lessons learned by the neurotypical protagonist come from the autistic techno-savant, who, like the ethnic minority, lives outside of societal constructs and is therefore ostensibly immune from the propensity for violence, arrogance, impulsiveness, and other assorted vagaries of human emotional experience. In the same manner that Huck learns open-mindedness from Jim (“I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n”), that Ishmael learns open-mindedness from Queequeg (“...yet see how elastic our stiff prejudices grow when love once comes to bend them...I was only alive to the condensed confidential comfortableness of sharing a pipe and a blanket with a real friend”), and that Natty Bumppo learns open-mindedness from Chingachgook (“There is reason in an Indian, though nature has made him with a red-skin!”). Kirk, Troy, Leonard, and Watson, each as a neurotypical protagonist, learn to access the best parts of their humanity beyond the scope of society’s arbitrary and solipsistic definitions. At different times in their respective universes, Kirk, Troy, Leonard, and Watson each learn to respect the unflinching logic of his bromantic partner. The proximity to an autistic “other” enables each protagonist to

govern his otherwise ungovernable passions and to find value in the eccentricities of the autistic techno-savant. The bromance with the techno-savant enables each protagonist to grow beyond his status as alpha male into a more complete human being, although it necessarily remains a completeness that relies on his relationship with his autistic partner.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the ongoing modification of laws and shifts in perceptions regarding homosexuality, gender, and racial equality and the profound and far-reaching element of marketing that accompany the contemporary popular culture manifestation of Fiedler's interpretation and exploration of the bromantic archetype. A perceived sociocultural agenda alluded to in "Come Back to the Raft..." has been enhanced by if not supplanted by a powerful modern day media presence capable of packaging and promoting specific relationship permutations for public consumption. For Fiedler, blacks and homosexuals posed "quite opposite problems, or at least problems suggesting quite opposite solutions. Our laws on homosexuality and the context of prejudice they objectify must apparently be changed to accord with a stubborn social fact; whereas it is the social fact, our overt behavior toward the Negro, that must be modified to accord with our laws..." ("Raft" 27). Fiedler adds an examination of the "common male revenge against women for having flagrantly betrayed that myth [of the Immaculate Young Girl]" ("Raft" 27). The fact that the "flagrantly betrayed myth" is itself a male contrivance tends to fall by the wayside. While Western culture has made certain social developments and continues to reconcile itself with the evident hypocrisy between its moral behavior and its laws, its anxieties about homosexuality, women, race, and now, technology, have found a convenient outlet in the recurring expression of the neurotypical-autistic bromance. Although it is open for discussion whether this brand of the bromance is an exploitative media contrivance or whether the "stubborn social fact" of autism drives the new version of the bromantic pairing, I submit,

with Fiedler firmly in mind, that the latter is the case. With the reality of autism increasingly implanted in public consciousness, the modern mainstream can now better access a historically inaccessible condition. That the condition slots so neatly into a bromantic archetype in search of a new host is low-hanging fruit for pop culture producers and is an ideal subject for the visual rhetorical mechanisms they employ.

At its core, the typical bromance involves access to a mutually-beneficial exchange of values. Kirk gets access to Spock's computational logic; Spock learns how to be more human. Troy benefits from Abed's rigid commitment to in-your-face honesty; Abed learns how to socialize and to be more neurotypically "human." Leonard benefits academically and professionally from Sheldon's brilliance; Sheldon benefits socially. Following the trauma of war, Watson finds an existential reason for being; Sherlock learns the value of friendship. In each case, the neurotypical protagonist tends to be a free-thinker, a popular figure, a natural leader, with a touch of the renegade when called for. He tends to be of high moral standards and has a greater appreciation for nature than the other neurotypicals around him. He is charismatic, intuitive, and essentially the embodiment of nearly everything popular culture has traditionally required of its heroic leading man. He tends to be possessed of physicality, creative problem-solving abilities, confidence, and classic good looks. Possessing none of these qualities, the Noble Savant, on the other hand, tends to be exactly what an audience might expect of a person on the autism spectrum: a lost and emotionally locked away genius with limited social awareness and an obsessive preoccupation with a mathematical or technological avocation representing the antithesis of anything remotely social or emotional. He is admired for what he can provide and feared or marginalized for what he cannot. Of the neurotypical and the autistic savant, each is untouchable in his own right. They share a sense of isolation, a sense of being within but not *of*

the group. Each is a physical presence, an indispensable contributor to the cause; yet, neither truly fits in. The neurotypical leader is too charming, too human, for the rest of the neurotypicals. The Noble Savant, not human enough, is too plugged in to a world of technology to function as a neurotypical. Together, however, they occupy a common space in terms of what each can provide the other in their ultimate capacity as perfect partners in an imperfect world. Audiences can marvel at the exceptionality of each – of the leadership skills of the more human-than-human protagonist and his more technological-than-technology counterpart. Either one alone is not enough. For the neurotypical leader, charisma is not enough to survive in a world of technology. In that world, personality is pointless.

Having created and surrendered himself to a world of machines, the neurotypical must attempt to reconcile himself with his creation. This reconciliation originally took the form of the cyborg. The autistic techno-savant, however, arrives in an era, no longer simply of prosthetic mechanization, but now of artificial intelligence. He is a profound and apparently super human intelligence with nothing artificial about him at all. This reality cannot help but be a threat to the alpha male who clings to his masculinity in a world of increasingly relevant women, ethnic and disabled “others,” and nearly-sentient technologies. For Donna Haraway, masculinity involves a progression through stages of “original innocence, individuation, separation, the birth of the self, the tragedy of autonomy, the fall into writing, alienation, war, tempered by imaginary respite in the bosom of the Other” (Haraway 24). This is the same progression observed by Fiedler where the respite is real rather than imaginary, although the inevitable transitory nature of the bromance in Fiedler’s examples renders it the stuff of literary fantasy despite pointing to a persistent social reality.

As technology has evolved from rudimentary machines and cyborgs to computers, the neurotypical sought out a new and better union, a union he found most fitting in the portrayed autistic, the closest human corollary to the computer. For his part, the savant lacks the social skills to navigate a world of human vagaries. Tucked away inside of his own mind and able to relate far better to computers than to people, the autistic represents the other half of the perfect postmodern man, the one who achieves in a bromance what neither one can accomplish alone. It is the supplementation and incorporation rather than the subordination of the Other that fuels a cultural optimism that society may be on the verge of embracing and of being embraced by a universe of the technological, the only man-made frontier. Once limited to narratives about man's quest for the creator, ultimately futile endeavors that leave either the human hero or his god dead in the end, man can now assume the role of creator, determined to be one with his creation. The Noble Savant is the access point, the golden key that unlocks the door between the human and the technological to reveal a partnership without hierarchy, a cyborg-esque best-of-both-worlds coupling.

In a relationship that fascinates in the same proportion that it confounds, the implied contract is this: Through the bromance, the neurotypical will internalize the logic and self-control he requires to maintain his status as alpha male. The autistic techno-savant will internalize the passions, fallibilities, and social awareness that will enable him to function among the neurotypicals. The Noble Savant brings to the partnership exactly what a long litany of Noble Savages has brought: a sense of an atheistic ideal, a sense of morality uncultured by cultural constraints, and a sense of asexuality or of marginal, innocuous femininity without an accompanying Feminist agenda. Like his predecessors, the autistic techno-savant has come to occupy a central place in the popular consciousness. Rain Man, Sherlock, Spock, Abed, and

Sheldon Cooper commonly capture the popular imagination. They are the ones who point men to what they are, imperfect and imprecise, and to the computer-human hybrids man hopes and fears he might yet become.

In popular portrayal, the autistic savant, with his raw computational power, is a captivating enigma. He will never be the life of the party. He does not understand humour or subtlety. His speech is hyper-formalized and precise. He tends to be unnuanced, cold, calculating, rude, robotic, and apparently incapable of love, affection, or any other emotional response that the neurotypical population has come to define as characteristically human. Plugged in to an impenetrable operating system all his own, he may represent the human embodiment of a fear that technological advancement has come at the expense of intimacy. Despite this fear and as exemplified in numerous popular culture models, neurotypical man has come to love the autistic techno-savant in the same proportion that he has come to love gadgets and technology, in part because he wonders if they will ever love him in return. Fiedler calls this dream of a pure and uncluttered partnership “too good to be true.” And perhaps for Huck and Jim, it was. But in today’s neurotypical-autistic bromance, the techno-human version of “love without passion” may be just good enough to make it true.

CHAPTER 5: Sex on the Spectrum

ARGUMENT – AUTISTIC SEXUALITY AND MASCULINE REAFFIRMATION

In this chapter, I will be making the argument that sex and sexuality, typically left out of conversations of both clinical and portrayed autism, are ignored for a reason. Supplemental to that argument will be my corollary observation that sex and sexuality are currently finding their way into spectrum characters with rhetorical results that further a phallocentric schema. Until now, I have discussed the rhetoric of autism as a functional tool that does real work in the world. Gendered autism can be viewed, approached, classified, catalogued, and understood in the larger context of autism as a rhetorical construct. Autism in this regard is both a tangible, verifiable construct and a rhetorical text. Representations of autism within and across the four autism sub-genres I identify in Chapter 2 are dependent upon a reciprocal relationship with cultural values and expectations. Representations are a cultural text and can be read as a language that speaks in visual terms to readers, viewers, and to other consumers of the portrayed condition throughout its expressions in popular culture. Autism exists in a rhetorical tug-of-war between presentation as a posthuman, post-gender prototype and presentation as a reactionary reconstruction of masculinity in phallocentric, Humanist terms. As I will demonstrate, it is the latter version of this figure, with sex on his side, who is poised to win this war.

In *Imagining Autism*, Sonya Loftis proposes that because John Watson identifies Sherlock Holmes' autistic traits as representative of a mechanised mentality, "Watson creates a false binary in which someone who solves problems with reason or strives to objectivity is diametrically opposed to sexual feeling" (Loftis 37). This "false binary" is pervasive in clinical

practice, scholarly discussions, and in popular portrayal. Grounded in this theory of autism as a perceived and represented binary condition and in response to conventional wisdom that posits autism as a neurological disorder that produces a computerised mind within a body that is “a mere appendix” (Doyle 2017, 2), I will argue in this chapter that binaries between male-female, human-computer, and body-intellect are ruptured and potentially reconfigured, if only temporarily, by the possibility of the autistic as a sexualised being.

The autistic as a distinctly gendered-male character is different from the autistic as a character who either does or does not engage in the act of sex. Given this distinction between the autistic as male and the autistic as masculine, I will now shift my focus from gender to sexuality⁴⁰ as I make the case that an understanding of what is left out of portrayed autism performs a rhetorical function that is as vital as an understanding of what is left in. Viewed through this lens, sex and sexuality represent a negative rhetorical space in the world of autism as a produced and consumed cultural commodity. As in architecture, art, graphic design, or other aesthetic constructs, the negative space left over after the outlining framework has been identified is often overlooked, invariably vital, and inevitably revealing.

Many other pop culture manifestations of disability, whether physical or neurological, find their way back to disability as impotence. Whether it is the figurative emasculation and eventual lobotomising of McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) at the hands of Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) in *Born on the Fourth of July*, or Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis) in *My Left Foot*, the disabled man and the audience are nearly always asked to come to terms with the impact of disability upon sexuality as a defining characteristic of hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity. The autistic ruptures this

⁴⁰ For purposes of this chapter, I will follow conventional clinical and cultural models that describe gender and sex as cultural and biological constructs, respectively (Newman, n.p.).

dynamic, however. As a character defined in popular portrayal by his robotic aloofness, by his sensory aversion, and by his impenetrable narcissism, the autistic figure is immune from sex as a socio-cultural imperative. This immunity renders figurative or literal threats of castration meaningless. The asexuality of the portrayed autistic is, unlike in other examples of disability, an empowering rather than an emasculating feature. As one might expect, however, that status as an empowered figure will inevitably be weighed against a culturally-anchored association between masculinity and sexuality. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, changes in the rhetorical construction of the autistic figure over the past decade reflect this calculus, and sex begins to insinuate its way back into the autism-masculinity equation. The results of this re-insertion of sex into otherwise sexless spectrum characters could well portend a rhetorical shift in represented autism. One of the key features and perhaps a cornerstone of portrayed disability is the loss of the ability to engage in recreational or procreational sex.

AUTISM AND ANTI-METAPHOR

Based on this equation of disability and asexuality, I view the relationship between autism and sex in rhetorical terms as a kind of anti-metaphor. Independently, autism and sex are both commonly metaphorized and mythologized. In representation and across genres, the two constructs of autism and sex run in parallel and, therefore, until recently, never converge. It is at the point of conceptual convergence, however, where metaphor is defined. In rhetorical terms, metaphor, like myth, relies upon a tension between connectedness and disconnectedness, between the empirical and the implied. As in the case of consistent pop culture affiliation between the computer and autistic brain, there is a sense of the aspirational and of the “almost,”

as if one might be a means to understand the other. Autism and sex are problematic in that they lend themselves to metaphorization with a host of *other* cultural constructs but almost never with each other. Alone, autism has been portrayed as a form of evolutionary reflection (Humphrey), as evidence of the brain-as-computer (Badcock), as a brain-based explanation for cultural gender differences (Baron-Cohen), as a culturally redeemed “geek,” (Jack), and as a posthuman prototype (Murray). But in representation, the autistic is rarely associated with sex or sexuality. Sex has been commonly linked in metaphorical terms to everything from movements of feminist empowerment to phallic imagery associated with male gun violence to baseball euphemisms (“getting to first base, second base,” etc.) to describe stages of sexual intimacy. There is little connection, however, between autism and sex in pop culture representations, and research focused on living autists and their relationship to sex is on-going.⁴¹ Yet sex is present in shadow form under the autism umbrella, and it reveals by its absence.

Once unrepresented within autism circles, sex has begun to push its way into the litany of characteristics that comprise the portrayed autistic. This is a divergence from previous cases where the portrayed autistic has been clearly constructed with diagnostic imperatives, however accurate or inaccurate, in mind. Living autists are known to exhibit characteristics such as stimming, hyper-focus on a single object or activity, techno-centrism, poor social skills, compromised expressive language, rigid bodies, physical symmetry, restricted empathy or imagination, and echolalia, among other common traits. It follows, therefore, that portrayed autists will reflect such characteristics. And with near universality, they do. Living autistics, however, are stereotypically assumed (based on popular portrayals) to have little interest in

⁴¹ In clinical terms, studies of the relationship between autism and sexuality remain largely inconclusive, although evidence appears to trend in the direction of autistics as having “...a de-masculinised gender role independent of sex in the ASD population” (Bejerot and Eriksson) and where autistics “...appear to have a lower sexual drive and minority sexual status [that] is overrepresented compared with the non-clinical population” (Bejerot and Eriksson).

recreational or procreational sex. And yet, these characteristics are coming into play in pop culture representation. My immediate goal then is to determine whether or to what degree sex and represented autism can co-exist in the same rhetorical space.

Separate but related to my foundational questions, other essential questions that drive this part of my argument include “Why are portrayed autistics beginning to exhibit sexuality?” “Why now?” and “What are the origins and functions of the newly-modified rhetorical mechanisms that scaffold this new generation of autistic characters?” I now turn my attention to these and to a sub-set of questions that have remained relatively unaddressed in autism studies: What happens to gender, sex, and sexuality for the autistic in a posthuman ontology? What place is there for sexual relationships for an individual whose neurology, in popular culture if not in clinical practice, tends to dictate touch-aversion, technophilia, rigid introversion, lack of empathy, apparent social narcissism, and extreme literalism accompanied by deficits in communication skills, emotional reciprocity, and interpersonal social engagement? In what ways are visual rhetorical constructions of autistic characters complicated by the possibility of clinically-hypothesized albeit unconfirmed links between autism, hypermasculinity, asexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, and homosexuality? And, finally, given that pop culture constructions of autistic characters have been in flux since the earliest represented examples, what does the future hold for autism in portrayal?

These questions, challenging but not impossible to resolve, converge at the point where the autistic prepares to enter a new state of represented being. The answer to these questions, I will argue, involves the “normalization” of the autistic condition around a spectrum of sex. While I argued in the previous chapter that the neurotypical-autism bromance exists as a more stable relationship than other versions of the literary and cinematic bromance, pop cultural

representations point to an effort to bring the autistic into the sexual mainstream. The autistic at first appeared as an asexual character apparently incapable of feeling or expressing love. He was then presented as a character whose latent but newly understood ability to love was “trapped” tragically within the confines of the autistic brain. That ability to love was liberated via the neurotypical-autistic bromance. Now, with increasing frequency, autistics are being portrayed as both superheroic and “normalized” by way of being sexualized.⁴² While certain characteristics in portrayal are in keeping with clinical attributes commonly assigned to individuals with autism, it is the latter dynamic of sexuality that drives this part of my overall argument and is the crux of the question to which I will continue to return.

The main obstacle in answering my new litany of questions is that, as metaphors, autism and sex perform opposite functions. In pop culture portrayal, autism is associated with isolation, logic, autonomy, introversion, asociality, and hyper-intellect. It is characterized most saliently with disconnectedness and with a lack of empathy, whether clinically diagnosed or culturally assumed. Autism presents as entombed in an inviolable head; sex occurs between exposed, phenomenological bodies. Metaphorized sex in television and film presents either as violent and penetrative, as a tool for social leverage, as an indication of manipulation or of conquest, as representative of a divine union, as pathologized, or else as the consummation of emotional intimacy. Autism concerns detachment; sex concerns connectivity. In their article “‘Negative Metaphor’ and Proust’s Rhetoric of Absence,” authors Gerald Kamber and Richard Macksey, in their analysis of the “violence or disjunction in the tension” inherent in metaphor, note that “C. Day Lewis put this very succinctly: ‘We find poetic truth struck out by the collision rather than

⁴² Examples of sexualized techno-savants include Spock from the *Star Trek* (2009) reboot, recent portrayals of Sheldon Cooper on *The Big Bang Theory*, Elliot Alderson (*Mr. Robot*), Lisbeth Salander (*Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), and the socially impaired techno-savants from the TV series *Scorpion*.

the collusion of images” (867). In terms of the rhetorical relationship between autism and sex, there is neither collision nor collusion; these two constructs, until recently, have never really met nor engaged in conversation. Instead, the relationship is one of circumvention and suppression. Autistic traits are portrayed as incompatible with sexual performance; sexual traits are portrayed as incompatible with autism’s diagnostic imperatives. Ironically, autism embodies every stereotypical masculine trait except for the sexual. This problematizes but does not completely prohibit the rhetorical leap from autistics who love to autistics who have sex.

Because love and sex are prone to proximate conflation in popular culture, I make a necessary distinction between the two precisely because they are exponentially more distant in portrayals of autistic characters. The question of sex on the spectrum is quite different from the question of love on the spectrum. While sex remains undiscussed, love has become ubiquitous in conversations, both clinical and cultural, about autism. In *Autism and Gender*, Jordynn Jack pays considerable attention to “Mother Warriors” who, in their tireless advocacy for their autistic children, “deploy the supreme rhetorical appeal: love” (88). References to filial and parental love, especially, abound in autistic narratives. This may result from a real-world rationalisation intended to convince distraught parents that their autistic child is “in there” and that he or she can express and experience love. Or it may be a reaction to the cold aloofness often associated with the blank autistic gaze. Or perhaps it is a reference to the autistic tendency to latch onto something, usually an action, activity, or object, as the receptor of his or her attention and affection. Or love could be prominent in autism discourse as a means for parents to assert their child’s humanity or as a means by pop culture producers to manipulate it. Each autistic character across the four autism sub-genres I identify in Chapter 2 has “...historically existed in the American medical and popular imagination as a person for whom love has no meaning, no draw,

no neurochemical reward” (Willey et. al. 380). As such notions have been challenged over time within the real-world community of autism stakeholders, the visual rhetorical construction of the autistic character has followed suit. While “...the inability to love is the problem of autism,” (Willey et. al. 381) I argue instead that the true problem is the inability of neurotypicals to understand or to identify ways that spectrum individuals in the real world, and, by extension, in fictionalized portrayal, express and experience love. So, while the rhetoric of autism and love grows more expansive and defined, the phenomenon of sex on the spectrum responds with a much different set of rhetorical contortions.

DO AUTISTICS HAVE SEX?

In response to the question, “Do autistics love?” the answer, in life and in representation, is an increasingly emphatic and nearly undisputed “Yes.” The next question is simply this: “Do autistics have sex?” In this respect, autism is like other disabilities in that, culturally-speaking and in the myriad created worlds within the its genre, the answer is “No.” While the larger disability genre has begun a more intimate exploration of the relationship between sex and disability in films such as *The Sessions* (2012) or *Rust and Bone* (2012)⁴³, sex, in intergeneric representation, tends to remain at arm’s length. Cultural fascination with disability and sex remain entrenched in the same proportion that disability itself remains a source of curiosity, fascination, horror, and revulsion to audiences. Nevertheless, and as I demonstrate in Chapters 2 and 4, romance is not only present but is an essential component of disability narratives. In

⁴³ ⁴³ In *The Sessions* (2012), a severely disabled man (John Hawkes) seeks to lose his virginity with the help of a “sex surrogate” (Helen Hunt). In *Rust and Bone* (2012), Alain (Matthias Schoenaerts), who is an aspiring kick-boxer, and Stéphanie (Marion Cotillard), who is a recent double-amputee, engage in a romantic and sexual relationship.

general, disability narratives concern themselves with the culturally-inscribed normalization and re-integration of the disabled back into the sphere of the able-bodied. Normalization, in these cases, refers to the relative proximity the disabled character can achieve to normative living. This includes the ability to engage in work, hobbies, sports, and, of course, sex. For portrayed autistics, however, the sexual act, itself, remains covert, undiscussed, and unrepresented. While living autistics along the spectrum may or may not engage in romance and in recreational and procreational sex, in portrayal, autism and sexuality are established as nearly mutually-exclusive states of being. For example, in “Amok Time,” when Captain Kirk reassures Spock that the procreational urges of Pon-Farr are “nothing to be embarrassed about” and that “it happens to the birds and bees,” Spock replies curtly that “The birds and bees are not Vulcans.” For purposes of this examination, neither are they autistic.

Sex and disability have traditionally been easy to keep apart. Because disability is most often manifest through the perceived flaws or fragmentation of the phenomenological body, narratives of overcoming naturally trend toward the ways that the disabled figure either can or cannot be assimilated into the normative fold. In such narratives, sex is off the table. The autistic, however, presents as able-bodied, symmetrical, and physically attractive by heteronormative standards. This is problematic in portrayal. Sex, love, and romance are driving forces in the Western narrative tradition and are evident in abundance across genres. Throughout the disability genre, normative conceptions of sex as the exclusive domain of the neurotypical and able-bodied are aggressively reinforced through discursive rhetorical practices. Sex is indicted in the presence of disability. Recreational sex is rendered taboo as it challenges normative understandings of intimacy and of culturally-reinforced images of beauty and physical compatibility (Gordon 2004). Just as miscegenation is largely proscribed throughout popular

culture,⁴⁴ unions of the abled and disabled-bodied are equally rejected. In terms of procreation, the abled-disabled union has historically inspired mass eugenics movements, which continue today, albeit to a less horrifying degree, in the form of genetic screening and manipulation, foetal testing, prenatal screening, and other methods of early identification of potential non-normativity (Koch 2001). Also like miscegenation, the procreative potential of the abled-disabled union instills fears of the extinction of able-bodied exceptionalism.

As a neurological condition, autism, more so than other manifestations of disability, exists on the outskirts of norms of romance and sexuality. The autistic physical restrictions of touch aversion, hypersensitivity to external stimuli, and other barriers to socio-sexual engagement are a limiting factor in popular portrayals. The relative lack of emotional reciprocity, empathy deficit, and lack of imaginative engagement represent a second order of limitation. The intellectual distance of the constructed autistic and the portrayed intellectual superiority of the autistic techno-savant is a third order. Combined, the neurotypical, already restricted by conservative Judeo-Christian and Puritanical traditions and by centuries of the mythologization of sex, cannot come to terms with the conflation of autism and sex. Even in the neurotypical's own liberally-constructed narratives, the presence of sexuality in relation to autism has been historically written out of the script. The result in cultural production is the autistic as a sexualized being who does not have sex. Ultimately, my goal is to unpack this rhetorical construction. Whether intentional or not on the part of pop culture producers, the manufactured

⁴⁴ For example, as noted in the online Film Reference Encyclopedia, "The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPA) Production Code of 1930 (enforced after 1934) dealt explicitly with interracial romance, stating that "miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden" (<http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Race-and-Ethnicity-THE-PRODUCTION-CODE-AND-MISCEGENATION.html>)

autistic character points to a parallel between reconfigured constructions of autistic characters and transitioning definitions of masculinity.

The ideas of autism and of sexuality as spectrum conditions converge at a telling moment amid posthuman challenges to conventional, Humanist definitions of gendered subjectivity. Stuart Murray points out that when "...social interaction is seen in terms of data processing, as it is here [in the case of the autistic], then the parallels with posthumanism and a disembodied consciousness seem clear" ("Posthuman" 65). Part of the reason for the autism-sex schism is that autistics are considered deficient in social interaction but exceptional at data processing. And, simply put, computers do not have sex. Posthumanism enters the picture as a reconstructed world-view that dismantles Humanist traditions that govern what constitutes the "human" and, therefore, that govern who is "allowed" to engage in sex and who is not. However ancillary or accidental, posthumanism activates a modified rhetorical tool that humanizes the autistic and, therefore, enables him to be sexualised. Visual representations of autism reveal much about man's (as opposed to the "human's") posthuman dilemma over whether to embrace or reject a figure who began as a gender-neutral paragon of hyper-intellect but who morphed into a validation of masculine hegemony.

Liberated from the mechanized asexuality of the predecessor cyborg, the autistic is in the process of developing into a sexual entity. Embedded within the autistic mind is a radical assault on neuro- and heteronormativity as unimpeachable templates for the human being. In a culture of increased bio-scientific advances, the trend in posthumanist thinking is that we are "bodies in technologies" (Ihde). In fact, however, the opposite may be the case: the autistic mind represents a type of technology in bodies. The romanticised, represented autistic mind opens the imagined possibility for technologies to be organically embodied, unmediated, and un-reliant on the

artificiality of prostheses. Once impossible to fathom in the worlds of representation, autism is becoming humanized by becoming sexualized. The autistic character, once an asexual oddity, then an asexual bastion of masculinity, is being reimagined as a model of masculinity with sex re-inserted into the equation. In this sense, the autistic figure transitions from technophilic to technophallic.

The rhetorical transformation from the autistic as asexual to hypermasculinized and, ultimately, to feminized and disembodied⁴⁵ reveals 21st century male anxieties about the telos of sex in a world where masculinity, if not men themselves, border on obsolescence. Films such as *The Full Monty*, *The Baby Formula*, *Ex Machina*, and *No Men Beyond This Point* that address men as extraneous in a world of empowered women attest to this creeping fear.⁴⁶ The transition in autistic embodiment tracks in parallel with the relationship of man to digital technology. The portrayed autistic reflects male anxiety over his place in a digital world. But, more significantly, the autistic offers a means for survival in rhetorical terms. As I will continue to demonstrate in this chapter, the reinforcement of conventions of masculinity are being aided via the autistic in representation.

As I have illustrated, when it comes to autism, sex has typically been elided from the conversation. There are multiple reasons for this, many of which I have covered in previous chapters. My goal at this point is not to re-insert sex into autism discourse; rather, I am motivated to understand why autism and sex are kept apart and in what ways this rhetorically reinforced separation proves revelatory in understanding neurotypical male anxieties in a digital age.

⁴⁵ Films such as *Her* (2013), *Lucy* (2014), and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) from the Scarlett Johansson oeuvre illustrate the rhetorical U-turn that autistic characteristics make once feminized and ultimately dehumanized and disembodied.

⁴⁶ Respectively, these films are about six out-of-work men who put on a strip-show to make money and to restore their depleted masculinity, two women who contrive to have a fatherless child with sperm made from their own stem cells, two men who are killed by their feminized cyborg creation, and a mockumentary about a world ruled by women with men relegated to second-class citizenship.

Further, I intend to demonstrate at this point that the portrayed autistic is currently passing through two stages in his evolution: the first as sexualized, the second as feminized and disembodied. As the most recent stages in a history of evolving portrayals, these two phenomena help to buttress my argument in favour of a cultural rather than clinical connection between autism and masculinity. The marked absence of sex in relation to autistic characters is beginning to change with sex increasingly present as part of the autism conversation. For those living with autism and within the community of autism stakeholders, that is likely to be welcome news. Whether sex in representation yields greater clinical studies or leads to more open discussions within the autism community about sex on the spectrum remains to be seen as does what such developing portrayals reflect in rhetorical terms about equally changing cultural needs and myths.

AUTISM AND SEX ON THE BRAIN

While I have been focused up to this point almost exclusively on visual representations of autism as they relate to masculinity on the spectrum, I must now address the fact that such representations originate in cultural perceptions of the clinically-investigated autistic brain. I pivot, therefore, to the gendered elements of autism that inspire autistic characters in every way from features and physiognomy to behaviour and affect. Switching from cultural constructs of masculinity to neurobiological origins of gender and from autism as portrayed to autism as clinically diagnosed, I will argue at this point that rhetorical constructions of autism have their roots in what is known or what is speculated about the inner workings of the autistic mind. In this transition from the autistic body to the autistic brain, I will invoke the clinical

understandings of autism that drive and that are, in return, driven by popular, non-clinical representations. Those non-clinical representations, in turn, inform clinical understandings in an on-going cycle of clinical and rhetorical representations that feed and fuel each other. This section, therefore, will rely more heavily on clinical, science-based scholarship, although I will return to the Humanities-based visual rhetorical analysis in the completion of my argument. While autism may be “a condition with a striking male bias in prevalence that remains largely unaccounted for” (Werling), it is exactly the reflection of that bias as it informs rhetorical productions that I now call into account.

Some autism scholars argue that the keys to all human gender and sexuality can be found within the wiring of the autistic brain. Simon Baron-Cohen proposes a correlation in which “The female brain is predominately hard-wired for empathy. The male brain is predominately hard-wired for understanding and building systems” (*Essential Difference* 1). Other researchers ask such questions as, “Could factors that contribute to human ‘maleness,’ especially if intensified, be somehow associated with the development of ASD?” (Foden and Anderson). In “Sexuality and Gender Role in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Case Control Study,” the authors find, among other correlations, that “... bisexuality and homosexuality are suggested to be more common in men with ASD than in men in the general population...” (Bejerot and Eriksson). In “The Role of Sex-Differential Biology in Risk for Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Donna Werling concludes with the possibility that “...exposure to testosterone, whether systemic or locally generated in the brain, contributes strongly to ASD risk. For example, testosterone may very well initiate or maintain neurodevelopmental processes that steer the brain toward more autistic-like circuitry and function.” Other autism scholars suggest that “...the new autistic subject is enabled through scientific studies about sexed brains and the new biology of love” (Willey et. al. 371).

My intention is not to support or dispute such clinical findings, to interrogate the methodologies of such studies, nor to tackle the cultural Pandora's Box that such assertions are likely to open. Instead, my goal at this point is to connect the clinically perceived autistic brain with the cultural creation of the autistic body. The correlation between the autistic brain and the gendered body in rhetorical portrayal is compelling. As I illustrate in Chapter 2, autistics have tended to be portrayed as asexual. Two factors, diagnosable characteristics and a cultural need or expectation, inform such portrayals. Living autistics, officially or self-diagnosed, consistently report facing sometimes insurmountable obstacles in expressions of romance, intimacy, and sex. Hyper- or hyposensitivity to touch, difficulty reading a potential partner's expressions, and frustrations related to reciprocal communication are just some of the challenges reported. Accounts of celibacy and homosexuality are not uncommon among living autists. Temple Grandin, for example, in describing herself as "totally celibate" references disconnected "brain circuits" among spectrum individuals as a possible reason (Hubbard 232). Math and language autistic prodigy Daniel Tammet cites his lack of self-consciousness in his formative years about his homosexuality as "one of the blessings of my autism" ("Smartest Man"). Autism memoirist Donna Williams maintains that the autism spectrum "contains a higher percentage of gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgendered people than the NT community" (Groner 267) while Dawn Prince-Hughes, an autistic primatologist and memoirist, argues that "most autistic people do not see gender as an external or internal category that is important or even applicable, especially to themselves" (Groner 267, qtd. from *Songs* 59). This is a key feature that undoubtedly informs autism in representation. It also simultaneously differentiates autism from physical disabilities where it is the inability to have sex as opposed to sexual preference (or sexual indifference) that permeates the genre.

In some cases, autists report simply having no interest in sex. In other cases, sex might represent a cultural minefield that even the savviest neurotypical might have trouble navigating. Questions involving what to do on a first date, when to initiate or to allow physical contact, and when and where such physical contact, in geographic space as well as on the physical body, is appropriate are just a few of the questions that an adolescent or adult autist may have great trouble answering. Add to that issues such as difficulty with figurative or colloquial language, lack of eye contact, and a host of other atypical actions and reactions, and it is easy to envision the long line of hurdles that stand between an autistic and a normative romantic or sexual relationship, irrespective of where on the sexual spectrum such a relationship may occur. As illustrated countless times in pop culture manifestations, from *Rain Man* to *Mr. Robot*, the juxtaposition of autism and sex in popular portrayal is easy fodder for spectacle and humour. The apparent incompatibility of the autistic brain and normative notions of sex can be complex, bordering on traumatic. It has been speculated that it is for this reason that living autists in adult relationships have often gravitated toward those of an ethnicity other than their own as such a partner is more likely to be accepting of cultural and, by extension, of neurological variation from the so-called norm. For example, in the documentary *Autism in Love* (2015), Lenny confesses, “I wish I could’ve been a normal person...I would rather be a normal man than an autistic man with a million dollars.”⁴⁷ His frustrations are as evident as his desires, and to him, the adversary to be overcome is the “hard wiring” of his own autistic brain. Increasingly, however, the neurotypical perspective rather than the autistic mind is being challenged as living

⁴⁷ Interestingly, as a young white male, Lenny also cites the interracial leanings in his romantic interest as noteworthy: “You know what? I’m going to admit something to you. I like girls that are black. I like them a lot. What do you think about that?” Although anecdotal, this would tend to add credence to the conventional wisdom – much of it supported by research – that autistics tend to gravitate toward people of other races when seeking out a friend or potential romantic partner.

autists such as Donna Williams, Temple Grandin, and Dawn Prince-Hughes, significantly all women, tell their stories. Such narratives have the potential to rescue the autism-sex relationship from both a cultural and a rhetorical demise.

The line between treating autism and curing it becomes dangerously blurred in the volatile realm of fluctuating definitions of masculine heteronormativity. Baron-Cohen asks, “[i]f masculinity is linked to high levels of foetal testosterone (and this has not yet been shown), would a form of oestrogen therapy in the womb reduce the risks of autism? Or is there some other kind of pharmacological treatment that could mediate the effects of high testosterone?” (*Essential Difference* 181). The “cure” for autism, therefore, may also be a “cure” for masculinity. Rhetorical representation notwithstanding, it is unclear if portrayals reflect a speculated correlation between autism and sexual non-normativity, although certain studies potentially make this case:

Although our results neither support, nor oppose the hypothesis of an increased rate of homo- and bisexuality in men with ASD, other studies lend support for this hypothesis. Aston interviewed 28 men with Asperger syndrome who previously or currently lived with a woman [40]. Although they stated to be heterosexual, three of them reported sexual relationships with other men. In another cohort of 24 men with ASD living in residential care, 17% were bisexual or homosexual [16]. Taken together, this suggests an elevated rate of homo- and bisexuality amongst the male ASD population similar to the female. (Bejerot and Eriksson)

Such clinical hypotheses and their attendant findings lend support to my argument that the autistic figure represents first an advocacy of and then a threat to conventional definitions of masculinity. Recent portrayals of autistic figures as sexualised are a response to that threat. After

all, the paragon of reconfigured 21st century techno-masculinity cannot also be asexual and still survive in Humanist terms. In addition to clinical findings, there is a cultural motivation for the equation of autism with asexuality as well: “The language of these and other texts, popular and scholarly, assumes that all people with ASD, no matter how high functioning on the autistic spectrum, are or should be asexual, presumably because their sexuality is inappropriate and potentially harmful to others” (Groner 263). In terms of asexuality, autistic characters, therefore, have a double function: they support a hypothesis that equates disability with asexuality, and they reserve sexuality for the able-bodied and neuro-normative.

The autistic in clinical terms and as reflected in rhetorical construction exposes flaws in Humanist definitions what it means to be male, female, or even human. In terms of cultural production, this cannot stand. Increasingly, the autistic, once irretrievably asexual, is being shoehorned into iterative gender roles where “[b]isexuality could reflect independence towards social norms in the society, a standpoint that is common in the [autism] population. Another plausible explanation is ‘gender blindness’ that leads to an appraisal of a potential partner’s qualities rather than the persons’ specific gender” (Bejerot and Eriksson). As a figure who transcends gender and who appears immune from social complications and imperatives related to sex and relationships, the autistic challenges nearly every culturally codified idea of gender identity. At the same time, “...these new theories of ASD work to recuperate an extreme form of masculinity – one that highlights intellect, superrationality, and logic and at the same time minimizes emotions such as empathy and sympathy – and it recovers this form of masculinity within the bounds of neurodiversity and normalcy” (Willey et. al. 378). This equation of “superrationality” and emotionless masculinity returns me to the correlation between the autistic mind and the asexual computer.

The metaphor of the brain as a computer, although widely regarded as physiologically inaccurate, persists and continues to interfere with the discussion of sex on the spectrum. In her article “The Role of Sex-Differential Biology in Risk for Autism Spectrum Disorder,” Donna Werling reveals that

...it remains possible that exposure to testosterone, whether systemic or locally generated in the brain, contributes strongly to ASD risk. For example, testosterone may very well initiate or maintain neurodevelopmental processes that steer the brain toward more autistic-like *circuitry* and function. (Werling, my emphasis)

In addition to the rhetorical danger associated with clinical links between neurochemical maleness and autism, the brain-computer metaphor is problematic for multiple reasons. The notion of a “circuitry” of the brain slips too easily into a literal interpretation of the brain as a programmable organ, capable of being re-wired or updated with advanced software to achieve a gender-normative profile for the autistic figure. Such rhetoric further contributes to the idea of the autistic as somehow misfiring, broken down, outdated, or otherwise defective. In this case, rhetoric has real-world consequences as evidenced by egregious historical acts such as forced sterilization as in the case of Alan Turing,⁴⁸ various early-20th century eugenics movements, and the Feminine Boy Project, a 1970s UCLA treatment program designed to “cure” homosexuality through the same intensive Applied Behaviour Analysis techniques used (at the time and currently) to treat autistic children.

As these examples illustrate, associations between autism and homosexuality have occurred since the earliest identification of the autism condition, and such associations continue

⁴⁸ Alan Turing, commonly referenced retroactively as a potential autism spectrum techno-savant, was chemically castrated in 1952 in the UK for the “crime” of being homosexual. He died less than two years later from suspected suicide by cyanide poisoning. He was issued a posthumous apology and governmental pardon in 2013.

to be reflected in visual rhetorical portrayals as well as in popular consciousness. Reasons for the conflation of autism and homosexuality are relatively easy to understand as both have been positioned as enigmatic, taboo, and “curable” conditions that, if left unchecked, represent an existential threat to conventional notions of hegemonic masculinity. One study, for example “...lends support to a de-masculinised gender role independent of sex in the ASD population” and notes that “[t]he typical gender role characteristics associated with masculinised sexuality are rarely expressed in ASD” (Bejerot and Eriksson). “Tomboyism” is cited as a trait found in disproportionate numbers among autistic girls and women as is a “lower sex drive and minority sexual status” (Bejerot and Eriksson) among autistics when compared with numbers found among neurotypicals. Both states of being, autism and homosexuality, are currently at the same crossroads in a four-way intersection between remaining marginalised, being “normalised,” being embraced, or being adopted to indict hetero- and neuro-normativity as vulnerable, performative cultural constructs.

Within the autism community, the normalisation of the autistic condition is likely as feared as it is sought after. “In these more recent portrayals, we see the emergence of a new autistic subjectivity in the figure of someone with the potential to be self-sufficient and functional in society, someone utterly capable of loving and being loved, albeit with a quirky and idiosyncratic spirit” (Willey et. al. 369). There are three problems with such attempts at “normalisation”: first, they re-position neuro-normativity as the baseline goal and as the ideal state of human ontology; second, they privilege systemisers and the so-called male brain to the detriment of the so-called female or empathising brain; third, they further the possibility that autism will be diluted out of representational existence. After all, if everyone is autistic, then nobody is.

Since sex has long been disassociated from autism, in the created worlds where autism and sex finally converge, something new has got to give. In the worst-case scenario, that something, in the form of a kind of cultural eugenics, will be autism itself. Leading up to that telos, the relationship between advancing digital technologies and a crisis of masculinity tracks through representations of autistic characters in three distinct stages: the autistic as an asexual adult, the autistic as a child or infantilised (and, therefore, asexual) adult, and, finally, the autistic as a sexualised, heteronormative adult. I will elaborate upon each of these states in turn in the three sections that follow.

THE ASEXUAL AUTISTIC

In representation, autism as a metaphorized human-computer hybrid in the pop culture cosmos, starts with the asexual but charismatic Spock. Autism at this moment in its trajectory manifests as an incipient “personal computer.” As an embodiment of a mid-20th century understanding of computer “consciousness,” Spock had to be presented as cold, calculating, and decidedly asexual. That is not to say that Spock lacked sexuality, only that he lacked sex. This, in fact, is a key distinction between the autistic and the cyborg. For Haraway, “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” where “Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction” (“Cyborg” 150). Like the cyborg, the autistic is portrayed as removed from any type of procreative or reproductive sexual imperative. Unlike the cyborg, however, and as articulated in visual rhetorical terms by Spock and other autistic techno-savants that followed, the autistic attracts as much as he repels. Liberated from the visceral repulsion associated with the cyborg’s fragmented, prosthetic body, the autistic possesses a unique, autonomous agency,

which the neurotypical covets, fetishizes, and eventually has come to sexualize. The cyborg requires add-ons, upgrades, or something otherwise external to himself. The autistic, by definition, does not. This absolute autonomy is what makes the autistic figure compelling and what at first precludes, then masks, and eventually reveals his sexuality.

With Spock, generic conventions of alpha males and their swash-buckling bravado gave way to a new type of sexiness: the sexiness now commonly associated with computers and digital technologies. Once an invocation of a fear of cyborgs, prosthetics, disability, and of the incomplete phenomenological body, techno-human hybridity became a fully marketable commodity. In rhetorical terms, this is an expression of a desire by humans to imbue the cold logical sterility of computers with the “warmth” of the human soul. Spock, as an early representative of what would become the stock autistic techno-savant, represents the moment in pop culture history that this relationship took a rhetorical turn.

In the original series, Spock was as renowned for his aloofness as he was for his attractiveness. A key moment in the series that addresses this tension directly occurs in the episode “Amok Time” (1:4) in which the members of the Enterprise suffer a contagion with an alcohol-like effect that causes them to lose their inhibitions:

NURSE CHAPEL [taking Spock’s hand]: Mister Spock, the men from Vulcan treat their women strangely. At least, people say that, but you’re part human, too. I know you don’t...you couldn’t, hurt me, would you? I’m in love with you, Mister Spock. You, the human Mister Spock, the Vulcan Mister Spock.

SPOCK: Nurse, you should...

NURSE CHAPEL: Christine, please. I see things, how honest you are. I know how you feel. You hide it, but you do have feeling. Oh, how we must hurt you, torture you.

SPOCK [to himself]: I am in control of my emotions.

NURSE CHAPEL: The others believe that. I don't. I love you. I don't know why, but I love you. I do love you just as you are. Oh, I love you. ("Naked Time")

This is a moment of honesty, an expression of the attractiveness of a technocentric, aloof, and logic-driven man. Simply put, the heteronormative alpha male lothario is no longer the only game in town. If the human embodiment of the computer, with its logic and technocentrism, can be attractive to a heteronormative woman, then what need is there for Humanist man? As the computer becomes more tangible and ubiquitous, both as a fact of life and as a cultural construct, autistic traits become more compelling and more sought after as a constituent of conventional masculinity. The age of digital technology, a cultural shift to the scientific exploration of space, and women's and civil rights movements combined at this moment with the identification of autistic traits to make Spock possible as an object of attraction.⁴⁹

In another episode of the original series, a moment between McCoy and Spock captures an essence of sexuality of the autistic techno-savant. On the perimeter of the Kirk-Spock spectrum of masculinity, McCoy is the champion of the defensive, threatened, and insecure male:

McCOY: [to Spock] You see, I feel sorrier for you than I do for him, because you'll never know the things that love can drive a man to... the ecstasies, the miseries, the broken rules, the desperate chances, the glorious failures, and the glorious victories. All

⁴⁹ I contrast this moment with other moments of masculinization in the apparent elevation of intellect over brawn as in the *Revenge of the Nerds* / *Weird Science* genre of films of Geek-chic pop culture where the conflation of intellect and sexual attractiveness is played for laughs and is only aspirational. In these cases, the goal is quasi alpha-male heteronormativity, immunity from bullying, or at least the active assertion of agency; this is significantly not the case, at least at first, for the autistic techno-savant.

of these things you'll never know, simply because the word "love" isn't written into your book. ("Requiem for Methuselah," 3:19)

In this instance, McCoy represents a re-insertion of conventional models of masculinity to combat a shifting rhetoric that relocates masculinity from the body to the brain. This is McCoy as "every man," the figure who does not understand and who fears the originary autistic techno-savant who will one day spawn Nerd Culture. McCoy's fear is the fear of Humanist male obsolescence in the face of trending social and civil right movements and the egalitarianism of what will ultimately be referred to as the posthuman.

Although sex is out of the question for the autistic at this point, his sexuality, itself, persists. However, it is the pseudo-sexuality of techno-artificiality. It is the sexuality of a new, streamlined generation of computers and the digital interfaces that would yield the World Wide Web. Leonard Nimoy provides insight regarding his role as an emotionless, logic-driven sex symbol:

In 1967, *TV Guide* featured an article title called "Mr. Spock is Dreamy!" which explored the sexual appeal of Spock. The article read: "Through the agency of Mr. Spock, *Star Trek* has been capitalizing upon a fact not generally known among the male half of the population. *Women think being smart is sexy!*" (Joshi, orig. italics)

Here, and central to my argument, *Star Trek* yielded a moment of rhetorical transition from a body-based to a brain-based model of masculinity. Spock's autistic characteristics laid the groundwork for intellect as sexual potency and would pave the way for further development of portrayed autistics from asexual to sexual. At this point, however, Spock is sexualized but still does not engage in sex, nor does he embark upon heteronormative relationships. Sex is held in abeyance in part because "...the public and dominant story was and still is that asexuality is and

should be the norm for people with ASD” (Groner 264).⁵⁰ That sense of imposed asexuality perhaps began with Spock, but it did not end with him. As I will continue to demonstrate, the portrayed autistic has morphed in rhetorical construction and function but has remained a pliable cultural barometer by which expressions of masculinity in a technocentric era might be measured.

INFANTILIZED AUTISM

The infantilisation of the autistic figure who followed served the dual rhetorical function of highlighting by way of metonymy the encroaching presence of sentient computers and further avoiding the obligation by producers to portray sex on the spectrum. The repressed, sexual celibacy of Spock yielded to the unconditional asexuality of Rain Man, which, in turn, contributed to the infantilisation of the condition, overall. As computers in the digital age approached the potential to replicate human consciousness, the autistic figure morphed in response. Computers, once seen as intelligent boxes in the 1960s, began to present as anthropomorphized and childlike in their sense of wonder and in keeping with their entry into the world of human culture. “Roy Batty” the Replicant from *Blade Runner* (1982), “Joshua” the strategic-simulation computer from *War Games* (1983), “Johnny 5” the conscious military robot from *Short Circuit* (1986), “David” the robotic boy from *A. I.* (2001), “Sonny” the anthropomorphic robot from *i, Robot* (2004) are just some of the examples of the techno-embodiment of this stage in the linked phenomena of computer evolution and autistic portrayal.

⁵⁰ Of course, as I hope I have clearly established, Spock does not necessarily nor is likely intended to have autism. He does, however, embody the mannerisms, gestures, physiognomy, acumen, social ignorance, affectations, technocentrism, and general personal eccentricities closely aligned with clinically-prescribed autistic traits and, as such, functions in visual rhetorical terms, as a fitting surrogate for the represented condition.

In each case, the technologically advanced machine is presented as inquisitive, enigmatic, naïve, child-like, and potentially dangerous.

While the autistic's naïveté tends to be an attractive trait in popular consciousness, the autistic as potentially dangerous reflects a common fear about "runaway technology" and the exponential rate at which that technology appears to be advancing. The autistic, like the computer, becomes first a problem to be solved, then a tool to be used, then an entity to be emulated, and, finally, a potentially superior figure to be feared. Throughout this trajectory, even as gender becomes interwoven into the autistic-as-computer paradigm, sex remains out of the equation. The trend of keeping sex at arm's length from the portrayed autistic was reinforced by *Rain Man*. In this case, the computer elements of autism took over and left the body behind. A contrived and awkward kiss initiated by Susanna (Valeria Golino), notwithstanding, there is nothing conventionally sexy or sexual about Raymond. In nearly all visual representations within the movie, from his tantrums to his naïveté, Raymond is infantilized. Even his prodigious memory is a party trick, the application of which Raymond does not understand and that his brother exploits. This is the stage where the computer and autism in conjunction become a tool to be used and even monetised as the neurotypical in charge sees fit.

This dynamic is in keeping with autism as a "boys' condition," an overarching notion that was arrogated in the 21st century by writers of YA literature. Within this sub-genre, a young Sherlock Holmes prototype quickly prospered. Like Rain Man before him, the figure of the autistic boy made sense as a paragon of autism. In purely practical terms, an adolescent or pre-pubescent autistic protagonist has certainly rendered this elision of sex easier for pop culture producers. In strictly narrative terms, the elision facilitated an emphasis on the more visual-rhetorically conducive images of autism. These images include easily recognizable autism

characteristics such as stimming, echolalia, obsessive interests, and a penchant for forensic analysis, logic, and problem-solving. Each of these images represents a barrier, both practical and rhetorical, to the expression of sexuality on the spectrum. As such, writers and producers of and around the YA fiction genre had no real entry point for presenting sex on the spectrum. After all, these protagonists were adolescent boys engaged in story arcs geared toward other adolescents. In areas of adult disability, sex and sexuality can be touched upon if not addressed directly. This makes pertinent such questions as Fiedler's "Can they do it?" "How do they do it?" and "How does it feel?" (*Tyranny* 38)⁵¹. The adolescent protagonist made such questions irrelevant and enabled a shift in perception of autism from a baffling neurological condition to a quirky and easily romanticized set of personality traits attached to adolescent boys. In YA literature, the senses of love and affection that might otherwise find themselves channeled into sexual encounters in traditional narratives, instead find their expression mostly in maternal, and with less frequency, paternal love.

YA protagonists such as Jacob Hunt (*House Rules*), Oskar Schell (*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), Marcus Brewer (*About a Boy*), Nathaniel Clark (*Mindblind*), and Christopher Boone (*Curious Incident*) among many others, function in rhetorical terms as a billboard for boys. These are the Huck Finns of the 21st century, although their escape is interior rather than exterior; they drift in their own minds rather than down the Mississippi River. They are at odds with the baffling, hypocritical and frequently violent contrivances of man-made society. They are white and male, and they eschew the mystery of sex in favour of literal mysteries that they are, according to the theory of the systemising male mind, hard-wired to solve.

⁵¹ Refer back to Chapter 2 as well for the more comprehensive discussion of these Fiedler-inspired questions.

In order to further my argument that the elision of sex and sexuality from autistic characters performs a rhetorical function, I need to ask Fiedler's "Can they do it?" litany of questions of the autistic. In the cases under consideration, the avoidance and ultimate emergence of sex on the spectrum points to a model of masculinity jockeying for position in the face of an emerging posthuman (read: post phallocentric) ontology. While it is perhaps conventional wisdom in the community of medical ethics that "the physical disability/social difference debate reflects a growing dialogue about definitions of humanness and personhood" (Koch 2001), I am more interested in the ways that the specific and enigmatic neurological condition of autism both reflects and drives definitions of maleness and masculinity.

Beneath the tropes of recovery, accommodation, and assimilation, disability truncates to not being able to function sexually as a man or as a woman. The infantilisation of the autistic figure is not limited to his portrayal in the generic conventions of YA literature. A defining characteristic of the larger disability genre is the equation of disability with emasculation. Disability narratives are consistent in their address of the disability-emasculation equation as succinctly evidenced by this exchange between a despondent, war-wounded, and impotent Ron Kovic and his horrified mother in *Born on the Fourth of July*:

MRS. KOVIC: Don't say penis in this house!

RON KOVIC: Penis! Penis! Big fucking erect penis, Mom!⁵²

⁵² Other films within the disability narrative attest to this disability-emasculation equation. In *The Sessions* (2012), Mark (John Hawkes) and Cheryl (Helen Hunt), play out a study of the mechanics of sex for the disabled. In *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick (John Hurt) asserts his masculinity above even his humanity: "I am not an elephant! I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am a man!") In *Mask*, Rocky Dennis (Eric Stoltz) dates Diana Adams (Laura Dern), a young blind woman he meets at summer camp, although the relationship is short-lived as Rocky dies soon after. In yet another invocation of Spock, Rusty (Cher) asks a staring person, "What's the matter? Never seen anyone from Vulcan before?" The novelization of Daniel Keyes' *Flowers for Algernon* was rejected by multiple publishers who insisted that the ending be changed to allow Charlie to marry Alice. Keyes refused and eventually found a publisher willing to preserve the novel's less romantically contrived ending.

While this conversation represents the essence of many disability narratives, it remains an unasked and unanswered question in narratives of autism. As I will continue to illustrate, at least part of the problem is that the autistic is not considered a man yet in normative, Humanist terms. He operates as a boy or as a computer or as a Noble Savant, but he is almost never shown as a sexual or sexualized being with normative sexual urges or inclinations. The upshot for a man is that disability precludes sex, while a man capable of sex must not really be disabled.

Like other versions of the portrayed autistic, the juvenile autist draws on stock elements of conventional masculinity to promote what men perceive to be the best parts of their masculine selves. At least part of the portrayed autistic's function is to "...point at (and point out) social hypocrisies, as though they [the autistics] were large – and exceptionally intelligent – children" (Bethune 5). Viewed through this lens, autism moves from a deficit to an abundance model. I contrast this with Baron-Cohen's Extreme Male Brain theory, where "normal men are 'autismized,' understood as functioning analogically to individuals with autism, only in a lesser or reduced manner" (Jack, "Male Brain"). Such observations and existing rhetorical constructions yield two mutually-exclusive possibilities: Clinical autism is an extreme form of asexual masculinity, or else culturally-constructed masculinity is simply a socio-sexualized version of autism.

Typically, these possibilities, coupled with clinical and pop culture narratives, fuel a cultural understanding of autism as an asexual condition. While such perceptions may have clinical justification as I will discuss in the following section, they are problematic in their inevitable conflation with the lived condition. In portrayal, autism could not be confined to the seductive asexuality of Spock, the inviolable asexuality of Rain Man, or the infantilised asexuality of the Autarchic-Adolescent Autist of the YA genre. As living autists, from nearly

every place on the sexuality spectrum, matured, told their stories, and lived their lives, represented figures followed suit.

SEXUALIZED AUTISM

This point on the timeline of visual rhetorical constructions of the autistic character sees a transition from asexuality to sexuality. In portrayal, these are constructions initially presented as an alien might view sex. Predictably, sex is approached on the spectrum in a more logical, matter-of-fact, contractual manner. Like many other elements of autism, the rhetorical gateway to sex is played for laughs. It originates from a place of naïveté about this fundamental, interrelational aspect of the human condition. The autistic functions as an avatar in the re-masculinisation of Nerd Culture. For the autistic, a rhetorical reconfiguration of sex leads to normalisation, which leads to a dilution of autism in portrayal and to a first step in the return to hegemonic, alpha-male masculinity as the template for male ontology.

With the addition of sex into the equation, the autistic becomes normalised, while the autistic techno-savant becomes a simple techno-savant. Once purely a metaphorized artifact representing anxieties over the ever-shrinking gap between human and computer consciousness, the autistic character is being re-injected with characteristics of conventional, Humanist definitions of what it means to be a man. Where the hypothesized, transhuman end-game once anticipated the union of human and computer, the 21st century end-game has morphed in reaction to exactly that telos. In retrospect, the cyborg, for all his mechanized prosthetics, is still more human than the autistic techno-savant. The newly sexualized (read: humanized) techno-savant is emblematic of a male buyer's remorse. Initially hailed in as a rhetorical reconfiguration of

masculinity that enabled subordinated males to achieve hegemonic male status, the autistic could not continue to perform this function without a sexual component being re-inserted into the mix.

I identify this moment as an important point of rhetorical diversion for the portrayed autistic. It is a moment that furthers my argument in favour of an umbilical connection between the rhetoric of autism and the perceived cultural reality of masculinity under siege. Given the historical progression of the male prototype, the autistic figure could have stood on his own as a new, unchanging and unchangeable masculine prototype; he could have become ultra-feminised with hegemonic masculinity disappearing forever; he could have remained asexual and androgynous in support of anti-iterative assaults on performative notions of gender in a posthuman world; or he could have continued to evolve along technocentric lines until he transformed into a disembodied but still masculine being of pure intellect. None of these appears to be an inevitable telos for the portrayed autistic, however. Instead, the traits embodied by the autistic appear prepared to follow one of two different paths altogether: the autistic as a disembodied, *feminised* techno-consciousness or else the autistic as an obsolete cultural construction that surrenders to the re-masculinised prototype I mentioned above. Either of these final two scenarios portends the end of one type of autism as it ushers in another.

In the process, autistic characteristics are still being cherry-picked; however, they are now being cherry-picked with greater rhetorical precision and to meet a different cultural need and to perform a different cultural function. Sheldon Cooper is now firmly engaged in a relationship with Amy, his live-in girlfriend. They have sex regularly. Extremely regularly, in fact: exactly once a year.⁵³ With characters such as the bi-sexual Lisbeth Salander and the new

⁵³ At the time of this writing, Amy has accepted Sheldon's marriage proposal.

iteration of Spock⁵⁴, autistic traits and sex, long presented as mutually-exclusive, have become strange but viable bedfellows. Where masculinity once transitioned in an era of burgeoning Nerd Culture from body to intellect-based, the next transition is at hand. The autistic techno-savant is returning to body-based. An examination of this moment of transition is essential for my argument that the autistic figure has been arrogated by pop culture producers, whether intentionally or not, as a metonym for a masculine prototype. Because masculinity, like autism, is a consistently moving target, the texts under investigation warrant a close reading, an example of which follows:

Given his now ten-year story arc, the character Sheldon Cooper neatly embodies transitioning rhetorical displays of autism, the relationship between autistic characteristics and transitioning definitions of masculinity, and transitioning rhetorical constructions of the relationship between autism and sex. While the dynamic occurs with autism irrespective of its genre, this trajectory is encapsulated by an evolving series of relationship dynamics between Sheldon and Amy (Mayim Bialik) on *The Big Bang Theory*, a show which has always had, rooted drolly in the “bang” of its title, the intersection of science and sex. The narrative arc that sex takes through the current ten seasons of the show is clearly delineated as the following three selections demonstrate:

In the first season (1:7, “The Dumpling Paradox”), sex is a nearly-ignored hypothetical, something unfathomable and off-putting:

⁵⁴ Spock has morphed from the walking alien / computer of Leonard Nimoy’s portrayal to the action-star, semi-romantic Spock as portrayed by Zachary Quinto in the *Star Trek* (2009) reboot. J. J. Abrams, known for his epic projects and high-energy directorial style (*Lost*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Mission Impossible III*, etc.), offers a reconfigured vision of the Spock character as a more conflicted, emotional, animated, and, significant to my argument, sexual figure.

LEONARD: Sheldon, think this through. You're going to ask Howard to choose between sex and *Halo*.

SHELDON: No, I'm going to ask him to choose between sex and *Halo 3*. As far as I know sex has not been upgraded to include high-def graphics and enhanced weapons systems.

LEONARD: You're right, all sex has is nudity, orgasms and human contact.

SHELDON: My point.

This is the adolescent boy's understanding of or refusal to attempt to understand sex. For this figure, sex is something foreign, bodily, and ultimately repulsive. Reflected in the technosexual sub-genre of science fiction and fantasy films such as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Videodrome* (1983), *Electric Dreams* (1984), *Weird Science* (1985), without a digital component, sex is hardly worth pursuing.

Next, in Season 4 (4:5, "The Desperation Emanation"), sex is approached more directly, albeit with the limited clinical knowledge of an intelligent child who is compelled to lie about his understanding of sex and the degree of his engagement:

AMY'S MOTHER: It's nice to meet you too Sheldon, I honestly didn't believe Amy when she told me she had a boyfriend.

SHELDON: I assure you, I am quite real, and I'm having regular intercourse with your daughter.

AMY'S MOTHER: What?

SHELDON: Oh yes. We're like wild animals in heat. It's a wonder neither of us has been hurt!

AMY'S MOTHER: Amy? What is he saying?

AMY: You wanted me to have a boyfriend, mother, well here he is! Have to sign off now. My hunger for Sheldon is stirring in my loins.

SHELDON: Oh yes. It's time for me to make love to your daughter's vagina.

At this point in the expression of autistic sexuality, sex has become inevitable as a cultural reality but still theoretical as an interrelational practice. This is the act of sex as theatrical, as plotted out, and as used for purposes of deception and for the illusion of normalcy. This is sex as interpreted by the mind of an adolescent boy. The reality of the act of sex is concealed under layers of irony, clinical detachment, and awkward humour.

Finally, in Season 10 (10:16, "The Allowance Evaporation"), sex is a matter of regular fact, now something to be coveted by the other, left-behind members of Nerd Culture:

BERT [to Amy and Sheldon]: Well, I really envy your relationship. Other than you two only having sex once a year, you're the perfect couple.

This transition over the course of ten seasons of the show tracks with the overall evolution of the autistic techno-savant across genres. This represents a point of divergence from clinical models of autism where the autistic figure begins to become "normalised." While he maintains certain traits of his autistic origins, he becomes drawn into the heteronormative fold by way of sex and sexuality.

In the case of *The Big Bang Theory*, as Sheldon is portrayed as increasingly neuro-normative, characters such as Bert and Stuart are introduced. These characters are the new Nerds. They are a retrogression to characters with limited social skills, above average intelligence but with none of the enviable traits of hyper-intellect or sex appeal later found in the autistic techno-savant. This "...heterosexualization of the new autistic subject" (Willey et. al. 370) further advances heteronormativity and further marginalises homosexuality,

transgenderism, and other expressions of sexuality including asexuality and celibacy. In short, “[t]he new autistic subject does not expand our conceptions of love and loving but instead conforms to quite normative notions, naturalizing heterosexual coupling within the biological body” (Willey et. al. 385). While autism in portrayal appeared at first to gesture toward the rhetorical construction of a new type of masculinity, portrayals have been modified to bring such constructions full circle. Autism has shifted away from virginal, asexual, or homosexual representations of the condition and into autistics and autistic techno-savant as re-sexualized, and, therefore, re-masculinized and rendered functionally un-autistic.

The shift in rhetorical construction of the autistic from asexual to heteronormative is advantageous and problematic. It is advantageous for men because it now offers a 21st century prototype who is the complete package: white, male, plugged in, physically attractive, and finally sexualized. A posthumanist or other egalitarian, anti-hierarchical, or rhizomatic ontology is now less threatening to masculinity because there is a model character who does not engage in Humanist notions of greed, lust, immorality, etc., but he can now at least engage in sex and can assert his gender and technocentrism as portals to cultural power. The sexualisation of autism opens the condition to be viewed as something other and more complex than a simple lack of empathy. Relationships in representation allow for the possibility in popular consciousness for relationships in the real world. They are problematic, however, because they threaten to dilute the autistic by making him essentially a male Mary Sue.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ “Mary Sue” is a pop culture term that refers to a literary or film character who is arguably too perfect and is often seen cynically as a stand-in for the writer’s fantasy of personal perfection. The less-common term “Gary Stu” is sometimes used to refer to a male Mary Sue. Appropriate for my Spock-centric argument, the term has its origins in Paula Smith’s 1973 *Star Trek* parody of the “perfect-protagonist” phenomenon common in *Star Trek* fan fiction.

Autism is diluted into non-existence as representations become too close to a masculinized ideal. The transition from autistic to “normalised” manifests chronologically. In *Rain Man* (1988), sex is nearly non-existent in relation to autism. In *Mozart and the Whale* (2005), the protagonists find that being on the spectrum threatens to sabotage their relationship. In *Adam* (2009), the relationship between Adam and Beth proves unsustainable.⁵⁶ In *Community* (2009), Abed has an on-again, off-again apparently non-sexual relationship with Rachel (Brie Larson).⁵⁷ In *The Rosie Project* (2013) and its sequel, *The Rosie Effect* (2014), Don, courts, marries, and has a child with Rosie. In *Mr. Robot* (2015), Elliot Alderson engages in a strictly sexual relationship with Shayla.⁵⁸ Once the autistic or autistic techno-savant figure is introduced to sex, his rhetorical role is complete. Autism, once portrayed as an enigmatic but relatively harmless eccentricity, has transitioned from disability to super ability and has morphed into an ultimate masculine prototype. Instead of a figure to be wondered about, marveled about, or pitied, the autistic prototype has grown into a complete rhetorical package comprising the culturally-informed best elements of intellectual superiority, physical dexterity, and, now, sexual heteronormativity.

⁵⁶ *Adam* encapsulates the visual rhetorical gulf that remains between the autistic as an asexual stereotype and as a neurologically challenged individual who nevertheless experiences normative sexual desires. Even when the autistic figure came to be portrayed as a potentially viable sexual partner, sex continued to be problematic: “In one shocking turn of phrase, Asperger’s syndrome is described as dooming Adam to be a ‘social, professional and sexual retard’” (Carraway, 2009, qtd. in Ignagni 127).

⁵⁷ In a defining meta-moment of the tenuous and transitory nature of the autism-sex equation at this point in its trajectory, Britta asks Abed if he’s about to embark on “...another intense burst of compatibility with a girl we never see again” (“Analysis of Cork-based Networking” 5:6).

⁵⁸ Because I am focusing here on a trajectory of autistic sexuality, I have necessarily excluded the YA genre and dozens of TV shows and films such as *Mercury Rising* (1998), *About a Boy* (2002), *Parenthood* (2010), *Touch* (2012), etc. that portray autistic children rather than autistic teenagers or adults.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion – Autism in Advance

CONCLUSION

Autism in portrayal is not a flavour-of-the-month disability. Nor is it simply a response to a zeitgeist. On the contrary, the shifting zeitgeist over the past three-quarters of a century has been a response to evolving understandings of autism as a “variation of human existence” (Grinker 33). Autism is a driving cultural force, not a reaction to one. It informs rather than reflects and acts in portrayal as an expressive means to promote a type of cultural conformity. Growing social equality movements and posthuman conceptions of biodiversity and zoe-egalitarianism, coupled with exponential 21st century advances in digital technologies, have created a cultural re-evaluation of ethnic whiteness and maleness as the markers by which all other forms of life are measured.

With masculinity suffering a dilution through the pluralization of “masculinities,” the Western male has vacillated between the extreme male prototypes of the alpha male as Humanist template and the omega male in the form of the socially inept intellectual of Nerd Culture. The autistic lands in the exact middle of that spectrum of masculinity and shifts in rhetorical function and in his extrageneric capacity as needed. He is a cultural fulcrum and functions as a compromise on a shifting spectrum of masculinities. He encapsulates the clinically-identified hypermasculinity of logic and systemization and the technocentrism, autonomously developed subjectivity, and immunity from posthuman assaults on the cultural performativity of gender. In terms of reconciling his masculinity with cultural and technological advances, man’s culturally-

informed needs have morphed over time, always in relation to his attempt to access the technological means of cultural power at his disposal.

The represented autistic, in each of his incarnations over time, has responded in his extrageneric capacity to those needs. As a cultural artifact, autism presents simultaneously as extreme masculinity, as biologically-informed asexuality, as effeminate or “subordinated” masculinity (Connell), and as rhetorically-constructed androgyny. Studies have demonstrated that “[w]hile exhibiting an extreme male pattern of systemising and empathising skills across gender, men and women with ASD display a similarly gender defiant, however androgynous, gender identity. Concerning sexual behaviours and gender role a conspicuously de-masculinised pattern emerged” (Bejerot and Eriksson). Autism as a masculinised *and* “de-masculinised” condition, while potentially problematic in clinical terms, has given the condition the rhetorical and extrageneric plasticity it needs to adjust to fluctuating codes of masculinity over time. When beleaguered or subordinate men need to see a man immune from the cultural threats posed by increasingly independent women, they access the original Spock. When they need reassurance that men will reign supreme in a technocentric world of brain over brawn, they access Rain Man. When they need reinforcement of their latent superheroic systemising ability theoretically inherent in maleness, they access the boys of YA literature. When they need to know that they are still capable of having a girlfriend, they access Sheldon Cooper. When they need to have sex re-inserted as part of the lone-wolf male prototype, they access more heteronormative spectrum characters such as Elliot Alderson and now Spock as portrayed by Zachary Quinto in the *Star Trek* (2009) reboot. When they need to vent their fear of being emasculated and usurped by the women who stubbornly refuse to abandon female-empowerment movements, they access the

ersatz Feminist genre of films represented by *Lucy*, *Her*, *Operator*, and *Ex Machina* where men appear to face obsolescence in the face of a feminized techno-consciousness.⁵⁹

Such illustrations make clear that autism in visual representation has served multiple functions: It has enabled a new generic model that better highlights the condition and its unique attributes and cultural implications. It serves a demystifying, pedagogical purpose. In its visual rhetorical breadth, it provides a postmodern and potentially posthuman model of masculinity. It re-entrenches a white-intellect cultural equation. It inspires a re-examination of the rhetorical role of disability in popular consciousness. It serves as the latest and arguably the most complicated representation of a marginalized Other against whom normative values are contrasted. And it allows for culturally acceptable expressions of love between men.

As a extrageneric template and as a versatile, intergeneric condition, autism does what no other disability under the larger disability umbrella can do: it removes bodily trauma and prosthetic enhancement from the equation, it engages with hyper instead of deficient intellect, it obviates the visceral rejection of physical deformity, it promotes an ideal of absolute autonomy, it apotheosises a nearly exclusive white and male ontology, and it disrupts the tropes of recovery and assimilation common within critical disability studies. Although once conflated with other neurological conditions, autism performs a much different rhetorical function in popular culture. Conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, PTSD, paranoia, and dissociative identity and delusional disorders have performed a unique cultural function in films such as *One Flew*

⁵⁹ In *Lucy* (2014), an accidental overdose of an experimental drug turns Lucy (Scarlett Johansson) into a super-savant and eventually a disembodied techno-consciousness and the ultimate voice of God. In *Her* (2013), Theodore's (Joaquim Phoenix) existential crisis of faith and feelings of emasculation are reconciled by Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), a feminized computer operating system. In *Ex Machina* (2014), two techno-savants Nathan and Caleb (Oscar Isaac and Domhnall Gleeson) build, test, and are ultimately outwitted and killed by Ava (Alicia Vikander), a feminized cyborg. In *Operator* (2016), Joe (Martin Starr), an insecure techno-savant, becomes infatuated with the AI voice of his girlfriend Emily (Mae Whitman) whose high level of empathy in their real lives alienates and emasculates him.

Over the Cuckoo's Nest, In Country, The Fisher King, Twelve Monkeys, and Benny and Joon.

Such films serve multiple cultural purposes including exposure of the fragility, complexity and enigmatic nature of the human mind, an imbrication of the mental states of “breaking down” and “breaking through,” and the reinforcement of the neurotypical norm. Physical disabilities, as illustrated by films such as *My Left Foot, The Diving Bell and the Butterfly, Intouchables, Rust and Bone*, and *Born on the Fourth of July*, perform a related but different function. In these cases, narratives of triumph and the reinforcement of the able-bodied norm are at the center of the visual rhetoric employed by producers and consumed by viewers. Autism alone exceeds the boundaries of the madness-as-genius and triumph-over-adversity tropes. With neither cause nor cure, autism has been ill-suited for one type of metaphorization but well-suited for another. The extrageneric autistic “blank” is sculpted and polished to reflect a clinical reality, to fulfill a gendered and ethnic narrative, and to promote a performative cultural agenda. The literature, television shows, and films that comprise the four autism sub-genres that I identify in Chapter 2 diverge from each other only in negligible ways; overall, their tropes, themes, and visuals converge to serve the unified rhetorical purpose of reflecting, directing, and then redirecting fluctuating definitions of masculinity.

The rhetorical constructions of autism embody a cultural dilemma. Should fictional representations serve a pedagogical purpose, or are they purely entertainment? Are documentary and other non-fictional representations of autism in keeping with the rhetorical function found in fictional representation? Intended or not, portrayals of autism are always subject to being viewed through a pedagogical lens. As an enigmatic condition with an unknown etiology and a host of co-morbid conditions, autism lends itself to speculation, metaphorization, and mythologization. It is unclear at what point portrayals transition from entertainment to educational. Consumers,

whether part of the autism community or not, are likely to latch on to portrayals as a viable set of instructions for coming to terms with autism as a lived condition. Those perceptions and misperceptions in return inform how autism will be portrayed and what contemporary cultural need autism will fulfill throughout its iterations. Occupying opposing sides of the same lens, the producer and the consumer are influenced by clinical studies, which are themselves subject to scrutiny based on small sample sizes, incomplete diagnostic information, implicit biases, and other suspect, limited, or otherwise problematic methodologies. The enigmatic nature of autism makes it a prime candidate for metaphorization but an imperfect choice as a pedagogical tool.

The core questions, therefore, must be reconfigured. Instead of “What is autism?” or “What are autism’s causes and cures?” I have instead proposed a new line of inquiry: “What cultural work does autism do as a portrayed condition?” and “In what ways do such portrayals inform neurotypical perceptions of autistics and of themselves?” With reconfigured and reinvigorated notions of masculinity as its rhetorical home base, most of autism in representation is dedicated to attempts, with near universal futility, to incorporate the autistic into the neurotypical fold. I submit that a more productive cultural purpose is served by enabling the living and portrayed autistic to educate the neurotypical about the neurotypical’s own needs, prejudices, anxieties, expectations, hypocrisies, and limitations.

Previous models of masculinity have been relatively stable until they were supplanted by a new model. In the early 20th century, masculinity was primarily body-based. In nearly every medium, masculinity was sculpted around and out of war heroes, cowboys, and secret agents. Superheroes, vigilantes, astronauts, and jocks quickly followed as masculine exemplars throughout the mid-20th century. In the dawn of the digital communications age, nerds and the geek-chic aesthetic followed by way of reaction. As a natural heir to the burgeoning culture of

techno-intellect, autism sprung into the modern mainstream and was quickly arrogated as a compromise model of masculinity. Combining clinically observed traits of the systemizing “male brain,” the autonomous subjectivity typically equated with the idealized Western male, and the neurological binarism associated with 21st century exponential advances in digital technologies, the portrayed autistic functions as both a reflection of and a reaction to changing notions of masculinity. As a malleable metonym, autism, as a cultural marker for reconfigurations of masculinity, is a nearly perfect rhetorical package.

An interdisciplinary approach has been fundamental in compiling the evidence that makes my case. Having drawn from fields of rhetoric, gender, media, and disability studies, I have identified, as part of a unique intergeneric autism role, the rhetorical function of the autistic figure in literature, TV, and film over the past 75 years. The autistic, I have argued, is neither an accidental, a coincidental, nor a static cultural artifact; instead, the autistic figure, in both living and represented forms, serves as a simultaneous sub and super-altern while embodying male anxieties over transitioning codes of masculinity in an increasingly technocentric era. As a pervasive neurological condition that, despite popular understandings based on cultural constructions, autism cannot be understood fully without an awareness of how the condition is perceived, consumed, and how it functions within individual disciplines. My formulation of a Rhetorical Model of autism, I hope, facilitates such an understanding.

Approaching autism by way of interdisciplinarity has enabled me to engage in a robust examination of autism beyond its clinical home. At the same time, I have been able to draw from and contribute to existing scholarship in established disciplinary fields to shine a new kind of light on a condition that, for better or worse, finds itself in its own cultural spotlight. Most important, I hope that I have been able, through my argument, to replace the autistic with the

neurotypical as the subject under the neurotypical's own microscope. In this sense, my case has been built upon the premise that how autism and the autistic figures are perceived is as telling as an understanding of how they are constructed. Understanding autism necessitates removing neurotypical heteronormativity as the default baseline by which other living and fictional figures are measured.

In constructing my argument, I have attempted to build upon existing scholarship. Stuart Murray provides valuable insights regarding autism as a Hollywood-manufactured construct and in relation to a posthuman ontology. Jordynn Jack offers a comprehensive examination of autism and gender in the form of "Warrior Mothers" and "Autism Dads" throughout the autism community. Simon Baron-Cohen attempts to connect autism with a genetically-gendered brain. Paul Heilker has advanced the discussion of ethnicity and masculinity on the autism spectrum. Maureen Connolly and Kathleen Haney have approached autism in clinical practice and in cultural portrayal through the lens of phenomenology. Sonya Loftis applies social psychology to autism in order to understand and to unpack the stereotypes the condition inspires. Darold Treffert has written extensively on the myths and realities of autistic savantism.

For my part, I have attempted to do what has not yet been done: identify the visual rhetorical framework upon which constructed autistic characters are built and refocus the lens through which they are viewed. The goal has not been a better understanding of autism. If anything, as I have suggested, I have been motivated to remove autism as a clinical condition from under the neurotypical microscope. My argument has instead been dedicated to understanding why autism is constructed as it is, what function such constructions perform, and how changes in those constructions over time inform definitions and perceptions of masculinity in an age of radical technological evolution and posthuman and similarly-themed egalitarian

movements. Popular culture institutions in the form of literature, TV, and film have served as a useful laboratory in which to test my hypotheses.

Throughout my analysis, I have not been overly concerned with results from clinical studies or meta-studies of autism nor in indicting their results or methodologies. I have not been interested in whether a character under consideration, whether living or fictional, has been diagnosed or is formally diagnosable as a spectrum individual. Neither was I interested in challenging historical or existing definitions of autism. My goal has never been to prove, disprove, reinforce, or modify existing clinical studies that attempt to connect autism with a gendered brain, nor have I been concerned with studies proposing or challenging autism causes that include vaccines, genetics, diet, allergies, and so-called “refrigerator mothers.” While all these studies help to inform popular portrayals of autism, they have goals, methodologies, and conclusions that differ from mine.

Instead, I have been focused on how (as opposed to why) characters with autistic traits are constructed as they are. I am interested in the architecture that frames the autistic figure. Accepting as axiomatic that portrayed autistic characters are likely to embody a clinically-informed family of common characteristics, I have attempted to demonstrate that constructions, no matter the intent, perform a function in the real world. That function, I have argued, has changed in identifiable, traceable, and predictable ways since the 1940s when autism was first diagnosed as a unique neurological condition. In nearly all its manifestations, autism has been linked to masculinity and to ethnic whiteness with those two elements tied umbilically to advances in digital technologies since the Turing Test first brought the possibility of a thinking machine into popular consciousness. In the mid-1940s, the simultaneous historical intersection of the Nazi ideology of white supremacy, a Western assertion of masculinity based on soldier and

cowboy prototypes, the birth of the computer and its attendant potential for an integrated techno-human consciousness, and the clinical identification of autism constitute an episteme whose foundations exist today in the form of a camouflaged rhetorical network. This is the archeological work that I have undertaken here.

In the end, unlike with other disabilities, autism is rhetorically positioned as a potentially new, different, and occasionally superior brand of neurological evolution. As he is, both in the sciences and increasingly in the humanities, the autistic is a captivating enigma. He speaks a type of binary that is only superficially comprehensible. He is un-nuanced, cold, calculating, rude, robotic, and apparently incapable of romantic love, affection, or any other emotional response by which humans have come to define themselves. Plugged in to an impenetrable operating system all his own, he is the human embodiment of the fear that technological advancement has come at the expense of intimacy. Such a perspective is both boon and bane for those affected by and associated with the condition. On one hand, this perspective opens a cultural dialogue about autism; on the other, it threatens to further dehumanize living autists. In an era and Western culture where digital communication technologies, idealised autonomous subjectivity, gender fluidity, reactionary gender binarisms, prosthetic neuro-enhancement, and a fascination with techno-human integration have imbued or informed nearly every aspect of daily life, the core characteristics of autism make it vulnerable for use as a metaphor for the uncertainty about the future of humanity in general and of masculinity in particular. With represented autism as a pivot point, I have attempted to address this uncertainty, unearth its origins, examine its function, and, as much as possible, project its future.

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